

My Daughter

TheRealThing

Star Wars

Complete



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My Daughter

TheRealThing

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Summary

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Description:

What if Darth Vader had realized who Princess Leia was when they met face to face? What would he have done differently had he known? Obviously an AU story.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1

“Lord Vader, we have the corvette aboard.”

The ebony clad giant simply nodded his understanding as he rose to his feet. “A squadron of stormtroopers,” he said in his deep baritone. “Have them meet me in the docking bay immediately.”

“Yes my lord.”

Lord Darth Vader made his way from his Spartan quarters to the turbo-lift, preparing himself for the inevitable confrontation with the rebel scum aboard the ship. Several transmissions had been received by the Corellian Corvette, transmissions sent by members of the Rebel Alliance. *Whoever it is, they will lead me to the Rebel Base. This is it... the break I have been waiting for. Perhaps this will appease my master...*

Vader gave an involuntary shudder as he thought of his last audience with the galactic Emperor Palpatine. The emperor held Vader personally responsible for the spread of the Rebel Alliance, and did not make any pretense about it, punishing his apprentice both physically and psychologically for his failure to locate the Rebels’ base. *And now he has that ghoul Tarkin breathing down my neck*, Vader thought angrily, humiliated that the devious officer had been promoted to the position of Grand Moff and given command of the Death Star. *That command should have been mine*, Vader reflected irritably. *Instead I have been relegated to chasing the rebel scum all over the galaxy*. This ignominy only made Vader hate the Rebel Alliance more. *I almost pity the commander of this vessel*, he thought darkly as he strode down the corridor towards the hangar bay.

A squadron of storm troopers were waiting for Vader outside the small ship. They parted to allow him to approach the vessel.

“Open it,” he said simply when he reached the magnetically sealed hatch of the vessel. Vader stood back and allowed the clones to do their work, preparing himself to face what lie within. *No doubt they will try to stop us*, he mused as he watched the clones at their work. Within a few moments they had brought down the door, and were flooding into the ship in a sea of white armor.

Vader let the clones do their work, easily repelling the rebels’ pathetic attempt to stop the Imperial invasion. He stepped around the dead bodies of the men who had died to defend whoever was on board this vessel, ignoring them utterly in his quest to find the commander.

“The Death Star plans are not in the main computer,” the commander of the clone squadron informed Vader.

Vader turned his menacing, black helmed head to Captain Antilles, the commander of the hapless vessel. He reached out one enormous black gloved hand and grabbed Antilles roughly by the neck, lifting him easily off the floor.

“Where are those transmissions you intercepted?” Vader growled. “What have you done with those plans?”

Antilles, loyal to the end, maintained his ignorance. “We intercepted no transmissions!” he gasped. “This is a consular ship. We’re on a diplomatic mission!” he wheezed. Vader was not convinced.

“If this is a consular ship,” Vader pronounced with a hint of sarcasm in his voice. “Where is the Ambassador?”

Antilles still refused to speak, but eventually screamed in pain as Vader squeezed his enormous fist tighter. Soon the sound of snapping bones was heard, and Antilles went limp in Vader’s sinister embrace. The Dark Lord tossed the dead body against a bulkhead in disgust and then turned to the commander of the squadron. “Commander, tear this ship apart until you’ve found those plans, and bring me the Ambassador. I want her alive!” he roared before he strode out of the room.

Now what, Vader thought irritably. *If they are not on board, then where are the damnable plans?* Plans: that was what this was all about. But not just any plans: plans of the Empire’s greatest weapon, the Death Star, an enormous armored space station with enough fire power to destroy an entire planet. Vader himself was less than impressed with the massive, lethal orb. It had taken the Imperial engineers nearly twenty years to complete it. *Probably because that idiot Tarkin was in charge of the operation,* he reflected. Vader resented that he was the one who had to chase down the stolen plans, when all along it was Tarkin who was, more than likely, responsible for them falling into enemy hands in the first place. But Vader had learned not to speak his mind; more than once he had paid a heavy price for his candor, and had learned to keep his opinion to himself. Instead, he did his duty, did as his emperor and master bade him to do, no matter how demeaning it seemed.

“Lord Vader, we have captured a member of the Royal family of Alderaan,” one of the minor officers informed him. “Princess Leia Organa. She is being brought to the detention cell right now.”

“I’d like a word with the princess,” Vader said, standing up. He had long suspected that the Organa household was sympathetic to the Rebel cause. If the young princess were involved with the theft of the plans, it would prove once and for all that Alderaan was not to be trusted.

Princess Leia Organa, the 19 year old adopted daughter of Bail Organa and his late wife, was led down a corridor by a squad of armored stormtroopers. Her hands were bound, and every so often she was brutally shoved when she was unable to keep up with the briskly

Marching troops. A door opened and the princess stopped in her tracks, terrified and outraged as the notorious Darth Vader emerged from the shadows.

Although never having met face to face, Princess Leia was well acquainted with the Dark Lord; his actions throughout the galaxy were well known, his reputation well deserved.

As for Vader, he had thought of the young princess as a thorn in his side or close to a year now, ever since she had taken the post of senator representing her home world. Her outspokenness and open disdain for the Empire smacked of treason to Vader, and he had looked forward to the day when he could prove the young woman’s treachery once and for all. Perhaps today would be that day.

Vader stared at the young woman; all the words that he had planned to intimidate her with evaporating before they reached his mouth. As he stared at her, a strange feeling came over him, a feeling of familiarity, a feeling that, somehow, he knew her. *But that can't be... she is a traitor, a member of the royal household of Alderaan... an enemy of the Empire.*

For her part, Princess Leia was surprised by the Dark Lord's silence, and decided to speak up before she lost her nerve.

"Darth Vader," she spat, as though his name left a bad taste in her mouth. "Only you could be so bold! The Imperial Senate will not sit still for this! When they hear that you've attacked a diplomatic...."

Vader cut her off. "Don't act so surprised your Highness," he retorted sarcastically. "You weren't on any mercy mission this time.

Several transmissions were beamed to this ship by Rebel spies.

I want to know what happened to the plans they sent you."

Leia shook her head, her dark eyes full of indignation. "I don't know what you're talking about!" she retorted in exasperation. "I'm a member of the Imperial Senate on a diplomatic mission to Alderaan!"

Don't play with me, child.... Vader thought angrily. "You are part of the Rebel Alliance... and a traitor! Take her away!"

Leia was marched away down the hallway, Vader watching her intently, not being able to shake the strange feeling their encounter had created within him.

"Lord Vader....Lord Vader!"

Vader turned to see one of his underlings standing there. "What is it?" he snapped.

"Holding her is dangerous," the officer stated. "If word of this gets out, it could generate sympathy for the Rebellion in the senate."

"I have traced the Rebel spies to her," Vader replied. "Now she is my only link to find their secret base."

"She'll die before she tells you anything," the officer returned.

"Leave that to me," Vader replied coolly as his mind worked feverishly to find a reason to keep the young princess in his custody. "Send a distress signal and then inform the senate that all aboard were killed."

Another officer approached Vader with his report. "Lord Vader, the battle station plans are not aboard this ship, and no transmissions were made. An escape pod was jettisoned during the fighting, but no life forms were aboard."

Vader nodded his understanding. He turned to his second in command. "She must have hidden the plans in the escape pod," he reasoned. "Send a detachment down to retrieve them. See to it personally, Commander. There'll be no one to stop us this time."

"Yes, sir!"

Chapter 2

Chapter 2

Princess Leia was a brave young woman. She had become a senator at the tender age of eighteen, making her the youngest ever to hold that office. Leia Organa was an intelligent, highly accomplished young woman, with a forceful personality and a strong sense of justice. Not only was she an astute politician, Leia was also a strong advocate of the Rebel Alliance. Adopted as a young child by the viceroy of Alderaan, Bail Organa and his wife, Brea, Leia had no memory of her birth mother, Padmé Amidala, who had died shortly after giving birth to Leia and her twin brother, Luke. Bail Organa and his wife Brea had always wanted a daughter of their own, and so they adopted young Leia Amidala Skywalker, thus bestowing upon her the title of Princess, as well as the Organa name.

Until now, Leia had never experienced true fear. She had always managed to find her way out of difficult situations, her intellect and political acumen saw to that. But the situation she found herself in now was different. Now she was a prisoner, a prisoner accused of treason, which carried a sentence of death in the Empire. *A prisoner of Darth Vader...* No one who was a prisoner at the hands of the infamous Dark Lord ever escaped, none were ever shown mercy or clemency; indeed, Vader's reputation as an interrogator was well known throughout the galaxy. If he wanted information, he would obtain it by whatever means necessary, even if it meant torture to the point of death. *And then there were the mind probes...* Leia stood up and walked about in the tiny cell, trying not to let her fears get to her. *Artoo won't fail me*, she thought as she paced up and down. *He will get my message to General Kenobi... my father will help me... everything will be alright...*

Little did Princess Leia know that the star destroyer she was being held prisoner on was now approaching the Death Star. Governor Tarkin was anxiously awaiting the arrival of Darth Vader, fully expecting Vader to hand over the stolen plans to him.

As for Vader, he had other matters occupying his thoughts than the stolen plans, which surprised even him. Ever since he had met Leia Organa face to face, he had not been able to put her out of his mind. There was something there, something intangible and yet powerful, and it gave Vader an unsettled feeling the more he contemplated it. The fact that the young princess bore a striking resemblance to his beloved wife, Padmé, made it all the more unsettling. An idea was forming in his mind, one that would not be ignored.

Sitting in his hyperbaric chamber, Vader activated his computer and performed a search of the Imperial intelligence network on the Princess. The information there held little that he did not already know, namely that she was a member of the royal house of Alderaan, that she had been the youngest person to ever hold the position of senator, that she was the adopted daughter of Bail and Brea Organa....wait... **adopted?**

Vader had not realized that she was adopted. Digging further, he searched for the records of her adoption, only to reach a dead end. Other than the date, it gave no other information, almost as though the circumstances of her adoption were meant to be hidden. *But why...*

unless her true parentage is too dangerous for her to know... unless someone is trying to hide her from someone...

The realization that Princess Leia Organa was almost certainly the child that his wife had been carrying when he last saw her on Mustafar began to blossom in Vader's mind, bringing with it a myriad of questions and emotions. How could the child have survived if the mother died on Mustafar? *Unless she did not die... unless Palpatine lied when he said she'd died...* this thought caused Vader to fill with rage.

The entire focal point of his existence had been to save his wife, the very reason he had embraced the Dark Side was to prevent her death; and yet, she had died. Or had she? If the child lived, if Leia Organa was indeed his child, then all that Vader had based his life upon these past twenty years had been a lie. *A lie!*

Vader sat perfectly still in his chamber, his mind a jumble of chaotic and violent emotions. The joy that the thought that Leia may be his daughter was tainted with the anger that he had been lied to. He made a vow to himself at this moment, a vow to determine the truth, and, if what he already believed were in fact the truth, to make his master pay for the lies. *If she is my child, how can I possibly treat her like a prisoner?* He thought in frustration. Leia was a serious enemy of the Empire, a Rebel, a traitor; *but she is my child, that is all that matters now.* With that thought in mind, the Dark Lord of the Sith fell into a restless sleep.

Vader hated Tarkin, as well as all the oily characters he surrounded himself with. *Pompous, self-important buffoons*, Vader thought irritably as he strode into the conference room behind Tarkin, where an assemblage of said oily characters was waiting for news of the stolen plans. They were already in a heated discussion when Vader and Tarkin arrived. General Tagge, one of the few men with any sense in his head according to Vader, was addressing the smug General Motti. "The Rebellion will continue to gain a support in the Imperial Senate as long as..."

Tarkin cut him off as he made his grand entrance. "The Imperial Senate will no longer be of any concern to us," he announced in a grandiose fashion as he took his seat at the head of the table. "I've just received word that the Emperor has dissolved the council permanently. The last remnants of the Old Republic have been swept away."

Tagge was incredulous. "That's impossible! How will the Emperor maintain control without the bureaucracy?"

"The regional governors now have direct control over their

territories," Tarkin continued, looking around the table. "Fear will keep the local systems in line. Fear of this battle station."

Motti gave a self-satisfied smile at this point.

"And what of the Rebellion?" Tagge persisted. "If the Rebels have obtained a complete technical readout of this station, it is possible, however unlikely, that they might find a weakness and exploit it."

Vader spoke up at this point. "The plans you refer to will soon be back in our hands," he averred.

“Any attack made by the Rebels against this station would be a useless gesture, no matter what technical data they’ve obtained,” Motti declared passionately. “This station is now the ultimate power in the universe! I suggest we use it!”

Vader shook his head at the man’s smugness. “Don’t be too proud of this technological terror you’ve constructed,” he cautioned. “The ability to destroy a planet is insignificant next to the power of the Force.”

Motti looked up at Vader, the look of smug superiority not leaving his face. “Don’t try to frighten us with your sorcerer’s ways, Lord Vader,” he sneered. “Your sad devotion to that ancient religion has not helped you conjure up the stolen data tapes, or given you clairvoyance enough to find the Rebel’s hidden fort...”

Vader had heard enough, and reached out a gloved hand toward the arrogant general, slowly crushing his larynx using the Dark power at his command with terrifying ease. “I find your lack of faith disturbing,” Vader told him simply.

Tarkin watched the general choking for a moment in morbid fascination and then turned to Vader. “Enough of this,” he snapped. “Vader, release him!”

Vader, though disappointed, knew better than to question Tarkin’s request. “As you wish,” he replied mildly and released the hapless general, who slumped to the table at once in a most undignified manner.

“This bickering is pointless,” Tarkin said testily. “Lord Vader will provide us with the location of the Rebel fortress by the time this station is operational. We will then crush the Rebellion with one swift stroke.”

If anyone around the table disagreed, they did not say so. Having seen what happened when one voiced a dissenting opinion, they thought it best to keep their opinions to themselves, and soon after, the meeting was adjourned.

“Vader,” Tarkin said as the men filed out of the room. “A word with you.”

Vader approached him and stood before him without a word.

“I want you to interrogate the Princess,” Tarkin ordered. “She is in the detention block, cell 2187. Use whatever means you must to find out the location of that base, Vader. Don’t mess this up—the emperor is already displeased with you. I would hate to have to inform him of any further incompetence on your part.”

Vader had to fight not to Force push the scrawny man across the room; instead he merely nodded and then left Tarkin’s presence, his heart and mind in turmoil. *Interrogate her? My own child?* He knew that noncompliance would result in severe punishment from the emperor, for Tarkin would only be too happy to report his insubordination. Yet, the thought of interrogating Leia, whom he believed was his child, left him cold and disturbed. How could he inflict pain upon the blessed child that his beloved Padmé had carried so lovingly? The child that had been conceived in such love and undying devotion? The thought of his wife still caused him tremendous pain, even twenty years after her death. Leia was the very image of Padmé, and so like her in her intelligence and political acumen.

Deciding upon a course of action, Vader headed for the detention cell, determining that his life would be worth nothing if he allowed the child of his angel to be harmed in any way.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3

Darth Vader had formulated a plan in his mind by the time he had reached the detention block. However when he arrived there, he was met by pair of storm troopers flanking a torture droid. Obviously Tarkin had felt it necessary to have a hand in this, and had seen to it that the torture droid was prepared and waiting for Vader when he arrived. The sight of the horrific floating orb gave Vader a cold feeling in the pit of his stomach when he thought of having to use this nefarious device on his daughter. *It will not happen*, he vowed, striding over to the pair of clones.

"I will not require your assistance," he told them. "Dismissed."

"But sir, Governor Tarkin..."

"I am in command here," Vader snapped, getting tired of having Tarkin's name thrown in his face at every turn. "Now leave me."

The clones did as they were told, and hastened out of Vader's way, leaving him alone with the menacing torture droid. He swept past it and into the cell block, the droid hovering behind him. He dare not dismiss it as well, not with the security cameras everywhere, as well as the cell block commander standing at his post.

"Do you require assistance, Lord Vader?" the commander asked.

"No," Vader said simply and proceeded on his way up the short metal stairway to the cell block.

He stopped at the door bearing the designation 2187, hearing the steady humming of the droid behind him. The door slid open and inside the young princess looked up. Upon seeing Vader she did her best to appear defiant, but her attempt soon failed when the droid entered the room, its long menacing syringe gleaming maniacally in the harsh overhead lights.

"Stop," Vader said, turning to the droid.

It stopped, but only for a moment. It had no doubt been preprogrammed to proceed as soon as its victim was in range. Having determined Leia as its victim, it drew closer to her, preparing to inject her with a drug that would lower her pain threshold, enabling it to torture her with much more effective results. Leia's eyes widened in terror as it drew nearer to her, her fear rendering her legs inoperable.

Vader could feel her fear, as clearly as if it were his own, and turned back to the ever advancing droid. "I said stop!" he commanded, using the Force to stop the device cold.

Leia looked with utter astonishment as Vader walked over to the droid and deactivated it. At once the menacing humming sound that had filled the cell ceased. Vader made a few adjustments to the device, and then looked back at Leia, who was watching him with a look of bewilderments on her face. "I will not allow you to be harmed," he said simply.

Leia's dark eyebrows shot up, reminding him of Padmé in her expression, affirming his belief in the girl's true paternity.

"While I...appreciate the sentiment, I'm not sure I can believe it," she replied at last. "You've done little to earn my trust, Vader."

"True enough," Vader replied. He walked over to the droid and activated a compartment hatch on the side. He reached inside and withdrew an object.

"What are you doing?" she asked, her curiosity getting the better of her.

"I need a small sample of your blood," he told her. "Hold out your finger."

Leia frowned. "Why?" she asked suspiciously.

Vader sighed, growing impatient. "For analysis," he replied. "In order to prove to Governor Tarkin that you were actually interrogated. Is that a good enough reason?"

"Tarkin?" she asked. "I should have known he was around here somewhere."

"Well?" Vader asked.

Leia hesitated, and then held out her hand. Vader took it in his, more gently than she had expected, and pricked the end of her finger with a small hypodermic device.

"Why are you doing this?" she asked.

"I believe I just explained my rationale," he replied.

"No, why are you helping me? I don't get it. What is your motive, Vader? I have never known you not to have one."

Vader looked up at her as with removed the hypo. "I didn't say I didn't have a motive, Princess," he replied. "But for now I so not wish to divulge it. Suffice it to say that I will do everything in my considerable power to protect you. You have my word on that."

Leia shook her head, unsure whether she ought to believe him. Yet, there was something in the tone of his voice, something in the manner in which he spoke to her that she surprised her. This was not the Darth Vader she had spent her life hating, the Sith Lord whom her parents had taught her to revile and mistrust; what was it that she sensed in his presence? And why was he willing to risk so much just to protect her?

"Have you ever been told how much you resemble your mother, Princess?" he asked, out of the blue as he stood studying her face, and then turned and left her without another word.

"No," Leia said to the empty cell, more confused and bewildered than ever.

Vader left the cell block, the droid following him closely. He left it in the care of the cell block commander, and then headed for the turbolift. Stepping into the lift, Vader took out the vial of blood that he had obtained from Leia. A simple DNA analysis would tell him what he felt in his heart he already knew. But it was the proof he needed to convince her. *To convince her that her most hated enemy is in fact her father.* The thought of telling her the truth... *can I blame her?* Suddenly he wasn't quite so sure of his course of actions anymore. Her protection was still paramount

in his mind, and he would see to it at any cost. But did she need to know the truth just yet? Would she be able to deal with the awful truth of her paternity?

His first stop was the medical sector.

"May I help you, Lord Vader?" a medidroid asked as the Dark Lord entered the room.

"I wish to do a blood analysis," Vader said stepping over to the scanner. "I do not require your assistance," he added as he took a seat. The droid bustled away, leaving Vader to his work.

Withdrawing the vial from his cloak, he placed a small sample of it on a slide and entered it into the computer analyzer. Soon a read out of Princess Leia's DNA appeared on the screen. Vader entered data into the computer and brought up his own DNA readout from the imperial medical database. He entered a command telling the computer to make a comparison of the two, and at once the two readouts were brought side by side on the screen. It was only a matter of seconds before the analysis was complete, and the read out appeared at the bottom of the screen. *Match.*

Although he had already thought of Leia as his daughter, having the actual proof of it was something completely different. Vader stared at the screen, a thousand emotions filling him, a thousand memories flashing through his mind. ..

Something wonderful has happened. . . Ani, I'm pregnant.

That's . . . that's wonderful!

What are we going to do?

We're not going to worry about anything right now, alright? This is a happy moment. The happiest moment of my life.

The happiest moment of my life... Vader remembered that day as though it were yesterday, and remembered how quickly the joy he felt at that moment had turned to terror when the dreams had started. And then, the darkest memory of all, the one that had haunted him for the past twenty years, the words his master had pronounced, the words that had driven Vader into the Dark Side irrevocably....

Where is Padmé? Is she safe? Is she alright?

It seems in your anger you killed her.

Vader's mind screamed in rage at the lie that had defined his life. *She did not die at my hand... she lived to give birth to our child... he lied to me! He used me!*

Vader deleted the information before him from the computer and stood up. Tarkin was waiting for a report on the interrogation of the princess. He left the medical sector and headed for the lift, his mind formulating what he would tell Tarkin.

Tarkin looked up as he heard Vader enter the Death Star's control room. "Well?" he said simply. "Where is it?"

"I don't know," Vader replied. "She wouldn't say."

Tarkin frowned. "What!?" he exclaimed. "You used the IT-0, didn't you?"

“Of course,” Vader retorted. “You needn’t tell me how to do my job, Governor.”

“So why don’t you have the location of the Rebel base?” Tarkin demanded.

“Her resistance to the mind probe is... considerable,” he replied. “Unlike any I’ve ever seen. It will be some time before we can extract any information from her.”

Tarkin was about to respond when an officer approached them to offer his report. “The final check-out is complete,” he reported. “All systems are operational. What course shall we set?”

“Perhaps she would respond to an alternative form of persuasion,” Tarkin said with a sly smile on his face.

Vader knew him well enough to know that such a smile meant he had just conceived one of his more diabolical plans. “What do you mean?” he asked suspiciously.

“I think it is time we demonstrate the full power of this station,” Tarkin said to Vader, the sinister smile never leaving his face. He turned back to the officer. “Set your course for Alderaan.”

“With pleasure,” the officer replied.

Vader stood for a moment, his mind working frantically. *He means to destroy Alderaan... he will do it whether she gives him the location of the base or not... I can't let this happen.*

Without a word to Tarkin, he left the room, determined to find a way to prevent the disaster. He had familiarized himself with the schematics of the Death Star. His expertise in mechanics served him well to gain a quick understanding of the space station’s primary weapon. Now as he strode through the corridors of the station he worked out a plan to disable the mighty weapon, if only temporarily, in order to spare his daughter the ordeal of watching her home world annihilated.

Chapter 4

A/N — I want to thank you all for the amazing response I've received for this story so far. I think I told some of you that I hesitated about posting it because is it just so very different from my other stories. I hope you continue to enjoy it as it unfolds in what is sure to be a most unusual manner. :)

Chapter 4

Vader made his way back to the detention block, having planted an error in the ignition sequence of the super laser. It would have a cascading effect, since the energy from the giant weapon was channeled into an array from eight tributary laser cannons. An error in one of the cannons launch sequences would be enough to stop the cascade effect, and render the super laser inoperable. *At least until the error was discovered*, he thought to himself, realizing that he was only buying time, not solving the problem. The team of gunners who manned this awesome weapon would not take long to find and repair the error. *Luckily they were not droids*, he mused, realizing how fortunate he was that their minds were easily manipulated. They would have no memory of his presence in the control pit, and have no knowledge of the error until Tarkin's little demonstration proved to be a failure. Vader smiled to himself as he thought of how irate the governor would be when his precious space station failed to perform. *Though I'm sure performance failure is something he's accustomed to*, he thought with dark amusement.

Leia looked up when the door to her cell slid open. She was surprised to see Darth Vader once again and stood up to face him.

"You must come with me," he told her. "But before we go, there is something you must know."

Leia narrowed her eyes, folding her arms over her chest. "What?" she asked suspiciously.

"We are en route to Alderaan," Vader told her. "We should arrive within the next thirty minutes."

"Alderaan??" she asked, her eyes widening with excitement.

"Yes," he replied, hating to tell her the horrific plans in store for her. 'Tarkin means to make an example of Alderaan,' he told her. "Unless you tell him the location of the Rebel Base, he will blow it to bits."

Leia stood as though frozen to the ground. "What?!" she cried at last. "Is that what all this is about?? You're trying to gain my trust as some sort of trick so I'll tell you the location of the base? Is that it Vader?"

"No, that's not it at all!" Vader retorted impatiently. "Why are you so damn stubborn??"

"I am not stubborn," she returned hotly. 'I just know when I'm being manipulated, and you are doing a masterful job right now, Vader!'

"I am not manipulating you!" he insisted in exasperation. "I'm only telling you this for your

own protection! If you don't give Tarkin a name, any name that is what he is planning to do. I have disabled the primary ignition sequence, but that will only buy a little time, hopefully enough for Tarkin to get frustrated and back off this idea."

Leia stared at him, the frown not leaving her face. "You...*sabotaged* the ignition sequence?" she asked, her voice betraying her disbelief.

"Yes, I did," he replied. "I told you that I would protect you, and I meant it, whether or not you want to believe that."

"Why would you want to do that?" she asked warily. "Does it have something to do with my mother? Did you know her?"

Vader was silent for a moment, trying to decide if he ought to tell her the truth. She still hated him, still mistrusted him; would that knowledge that he was her father make any difference at all?

"Yes, I knew your mother," he said at last. "And it is largely due to her that I feel compelled to protect you. Is that a satisfactory explanation?"

"I suppose it will have to suffice for now," Leia said, inwardly dying to ask him a thousand questions about her mother, her father, and the reasons behind all the secrecy. But now was not the time.

"Good, then let us be off," he said. "Tarkin is waiting."

Leia had to hurry to keep up with Vader as they and a group of storm troopers made their way to the control room of the Death Star. Tarkin stood before the large wall screen, on which the planet Alderaan now appeared.

"Governor Tarkin," Leia said when they reached the spot where Tarkin was waiting for them. "I should have expected to find you holding Vader's leash. I recognized your foul stench when I was brought on board."

Vader, who stood behind his daughter, couldn't help but smile at her gustiness.

Tarkin merely smiled in response, and touched Leia's face with one bony finger. "Charming to the last," he replied. "You don't know how hard I found it signing the order to terminate your life!"

Leia moved her face away from his touch with disgust. "I'm surprised you had the courage to take the responsibility yourself!" she spat back.

Tarkin stepped away from her, enjoying the moment immensely.

"Princess Leia, before your execution I would like you to be my guest at a ceremony that will make this battle station operational. No star system will dare oppose the Emperor now."

"The more you tighten your grip, Tarkin, the more star systems will slip through your fingers," Leia retorted haughtily.

"Not after we demonstrate the power of this station," Tarkin gloated. "In a way, you have determined the choice of the planet that'll be destroyed first. Since you are reluctant to

provide us with the location of the Rebel base, I have chosen to test this station's destructive power on your home planet of Alderaan."

Although she had been forewarned of his intentions, Leia was still horrified, particularly with the green orb that was her home glowing on the view screen behind Tarkin.

"No! Alderaan is peaceful!" she protested desperately. "We have no weapons. You can't possibly..."

"You would prefer another target?" Tarkin interjected, advancing upon her, causing her to back into Vader. "A military target? Then name the system! I grow tired of asking this. So it'll be the last time. Where is the Rebel base?"

Leia looked over Tarkin's shoulder at her home world. *Please let Vader be telling me the truth...*

"Dantooine," she said at last, looking down as though ashamed of her weakness. "They're on Dantooine."

"There," Tarkin said with a patronizing smile. 'You see Lord Vader, she can be reasonable,' he remarked looking up at Vader. He then turned to General Motti who was standing close by. "Continue with the operation. You may fire when ready."

"What?" Leia exclaimed incredulously.

"You're far too trusting," Tarkin chided her. "Dantooine is too remote to make an effective demonstration. But don't worry. We will deal with your Rebel friends soon enough."

"No" Leia cried, bracing herself for what was coming next.

She felt Vader put a hand on her shoulder, almost as though he meant to steady her. They both waited expectantly as the orders were shouted out to commence the primary ignition. After a moment or two, it became apparent that something was wrong. Tarkin turned back to Motti, his gaunt face red with anger. "What is the hold up?" he snapped. "I gave you an order!"

"There seems to be some sort of...malfunction," Motti replied, scanning over the computer readouts frantically. "I... I don't understand it! We were fully operational not three hours ago!"

Leia had to suppress a smile as she stole a glance behind her at the Dark Lord. He stood completely still, of course, his menacing black mask hiding the look of relief on his face.

"Well repair it at once!" Tarkin barked. "This is preposterous!"

"Quite an effective demonstration, governor," Leia said with a smile. "I'm very impressed."

Tarkin's face grew red with anger, and he stalked over to where Leia stood and struck her across the face. It took all of Vader's control not to choke the man where he stood. Instead, he simply helped his daughter maintain her balance. "Perhaps we can...try again when things have been sorted out," he suggested.

Tarkin looked up at Vader. "Get her out of my sight," he snapped, turning around and marching back over to where Motti and two other technicians were trying to find the computer glitch.

Vader took Leia by the arm and escorted her out of the room. When they had reached the corridor, and were out of ear shot, he turned to her.

"Are you alright?" he asked as he took her chin in his hand, looking at her mouth. It was bleeding from one side.

"I'm okay," she said, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. "A small price to pay, considering what might have happened."

"Indeed," Vader said.

"Thank you," she said, looking up at the Dark Lord who became more mysterious to her by the moment. "I am truly grateful for what you did."

Vader merely nodded. "Come," she said. "I will escort you back to your cell. We have to think of a way to get you off of this station."

Leia walked briskly to keep up with him, looking up at him every so often as she worked up the nerve to ask the questions she had been longing to ask.

"How did you know her?" she asked at last. "My mother, how did you know her?"

Vader did not reply at first, not knowing how to tell her the truth, not even sure he ought to. "I... I was once assigned to protect her," he told her, not untruthfully. "When I was a padawan learner."

"A what?"

"A padawan learner," he repeated. "An apprentice Jedi."

"You were a Jedi?" she asked. "How did you... I mean, why did..."

"So many questions for one as young as you," he commented as they stepped onto the turbo lift.

"Sorry, it's just that no one has ever told me anything about my mother before," she replied. "Did you know my father then, too?"

Vader turned and looked at her. "Yes, I knew your father," he replied simply.

The turbo lift doors opened and a pair of technicians stepped inside, putting an end to Leia's interrogation. There were so many questions she wanted to ask him. Never would she ever have imagined herself in this position, under the protection of Darth Vader. But here she was. She could not define what it was she felt when she was in his presence. He had gone out of his way twice now to shield her from harm, and now he meant to help her escape. It hardly seemed possible, and it made Leia begin to wonder just what exactly her mother had meant to him and why.

"I shall return as soon as I can," Vader told her when they were inside her cell once again. 'I cannot give Tarkin any reason to suspect that I am aiding you,' he added. "Or my ability to do so will be severely curtailed."

Leia sat down on the hard bench, nodding her understanding as she watched him leave, astonished by the turn of events that had just transpired.

Vader made his way back to his quarters, hoping to have a few moments to himself to think, but it was not to be, as he was summoned to the conference room by Tarkin. Resentfully he complied, hating the pompous governor for ordering him about, hating his master for giving him the authority to do so.

"There you are," Tarkin said as Vader entered the room. "Seems our little princess has lied to us," he said, tossing a report on the table. Vader picked it up and read it. Apparently the scout ships that were sent to Dantooine had found only the remains of a base, the Rebels having deserted it several months earlier.

"I told you she would never consciously betray the Rebellion," Vader told Tarkin as he set the data pad down. He couldn't help but feel proud of his daughter for her fortitude. Tarkin, however, had no such sentiment.

"Terminate her, immediately," he pronounced.

Vader made no reply, his mind trying to find an excuse to stay the order until he could think of a way to get Leia safely off the space station. His thoughts were interrupted by a report coming through on the comm..

"Our tractor beams have captured a ship about to enter orbit around Alderaan," the officer reported. "Its markings match those of a ship that blasted its way out of Mos Eisley."

Perfect, Vader thought. "They must be trying to return the stolen plans to the princess," he suggested, though not understanding why anyone would try something so foolhardy. "She may yet be of some use to us."

Tarkin reluctantly agreed. "Go and search the ship," he said. "If the plans are back on board, I want whoever has them captured at once. This has gone far enough."

Vader nodded and then left Tarkin, heading for the docking bay where a Corellian freighter known as the Millennium Falcon was now on board.

As Vader approached the ship, he was struck with a tremor in the Force. He stopped, attempting to contemplate what the source could be, when an officer approached him with a report.

"There's no one on board, sir," he told Vader. "According to the log, the crew abandoned ship right after takeoff. It must be a decoy, sir. Several of the escape pods have been jettisoned."

Vader looked up at the ship, nodding his understanding. "Did you find any droids?" he asked.

"No, sir," the officer replied. "If there were any on board, they must also have jettisoned."

"Send a scanning crew on board," Vader commanded. "I want every part of this ship checked."

I sense something... Vader reflected, *a presence I've not felt since...* there was only one person who it could be, Obi-Wan Kenobi. *He has come to rescue Leia...* Vader realized as he walked away from the freighter. *Do I tell Tarkin? If I do he will try to stop him...* Vader stopped in his tracks as he sensed another presence nearby. He turned and looked back at the ship. The second presence was quite distinct from Kenobi's, and yet the Force signature it gave off was equally brilliant, and somehow equally familiar. *Not unlike Leia's...* he reflected in confusion. He thought no more on it, as he hurried out of the docking bay. Leia needed to be told what was happening, *and I need to ensure that it does happen.*

Chapter 5

Chapter 5

Vader entered the cell block, ignoring the curious looks of the guards and officers who were beginning to wonder why the Dark Lord had seemingly taken such an interest in the prisoner.

Leia looked up to see her dark guardian entering her cell.

"Something has happened," he told her. "Obi-Wan Kenobi is here."

Leia's eyes widened. "Obi-Wan Kenobi!" she exclaimed. "Where is he?"

"I don't know," Vader replied. "But I have sensed his presence. A ship was brought into the station, a ship bound for Alderaan. No one was on board, but I know they are here. I believe they have come to attempt a rescue. I will do everything I can to see that they are successful, but it will not be easy. Tarkin already knows they are on board the station, and will stop at nothing until they are found."

"If he already knows, then will you prevent him from succeeding?" she asked.

"I will do whatever I must," he told her, turning to go.

"Wait," she said. "Why? The fact that you knew my mother isn't nearly enough reason to explain why you are risking your life this way, for I know Tarkin enough to know that is exactly what you are doing. Tell me why... who was she to you that you would do this?"

Vader turned back to his daughter, the set of her jaw reminding so much of Padmé it caused his breath to falter. "She was my wife," he said at last, expecting the horrified denial to follow soon after.

Leia simply stared at him, her mind trying to process what she had just heard. "Your... your *wife*?" she stammered. "That means you're...you're..."

Vader nodded. "Yes," he said. "I am your father. The blood test confirmed it. I'm sorry you had to find out this way," he began, but his words were interrupted by the door sliding open. A clone rushed in and peered at Leia as though he were not able to see very well through the visor.

"Aren't you a little short for a storm trooper?" she remarked.

The clone took his helmet off to reveal a young man, roughly the same age as Leia. "I'm Luke Skywalker, I'm..." he stopped when he finally noticed the other presence in the cell. His blue eyes widened in shock and he brought up his blaster to fire at the dark lord.

Vader was unable to move at this point. *Skywalker!!* he realized at once who this boy was, who he had to be. Even before the boy had said his name, the eyes gave him away... *my eyes*, Vader thought...*my son... Leia's twin...*

“Don’t!” Leia said, pushing his arm down. “He’s on our side,” she said, looking up at Vader.

Luke looked back at her incredulously, and then back at Vader.

“If you are here to affect a rescue, boy, I suggest you get on with it,” Vader told the young man, mildly amused at his son’s zeal.

Luke nodded. “Yeah, come on,” he told Leia. “I have your Artoo unit; I’m here with Ben Kenobi.”

“Where is he?” Leia asked.

“Come on,” Luke said, leading her out of the cell. He stopped when Vader stepped over to the door. ‘I suppose I’ll have to trust you,’ he said. “Even though I have no reason to.”

“Fair enough,” Vader remarked, stepping out into the corridor, where all hell was breaking loose.

From the far end of the corridor a steady torrent of blaster fire was keeping the other members of the rescue team at bay.

Quite an impressive rescue operation, Vader reflected dourly.

“Looks like you’ve managed to cut off our only escape route,” Leia commented tersely.

At this point the other human member of the team, a Corellian smuggler by the name of Han Solo turned to her. “Maybe you’d like it back in your cell, your...” he stopped when he saw Vader. “Holy shit!” he bellowed.

“Easy hot shot,” Leia said. “He’s here to help.”

Han gave Leia a look like she was insane before returning his attention to the situation at hand. “So what do you suggest, Vader?” he asked over the din of the laser blasts.

“Stand aside,” he said, taking out his lightsaber and deflecting the blasts.

“Well, that buys us some time, but it doesn’t help us get the hell outta here,” Han grumbled.

Leia shook her head at his negative attitude and grabbed the blaster from Luke’s hands. She shot a hole into the grating that ran along the floor.

“What the hell are you doing?” Han yelled.

“Into the garbage chute, flyboy,” she said, tossing the blaster back to Luke.

“Get in there!” Vader heard Han ordering his Wookiee companion as he edged his way down the corridor. Soon they had all escaped into the garbage chute, leaving Vader alone to combat the clones. That didn’t concern him as much as explaining why he had assisted the rebels to escape. *Clones’ minds can be manipulated... my children are safe, that’s all that matters...* He was still in shock over the discovery of his second child, or perhaps his first, for he did not know their birth order.

“Hold your fire!” he shouted. The clones, recognizing his voice, complied at once. Many of them were dead, others were injured. Still others were alive and looking at the Dark Lord

with surprise.

“Lord Vader!” the commander of the squadron said, approaching him. “What are you doing here? Where are the rebels?”

“You don’t need to know what I am doing here,” he said, bending the clone’s mind easily. “You didn’t see me. The rebels are gone. Search elsewhere for them.”

The clones looked at one another in confusion, and then started to file out of the exit that they had come through. Satisfied with their compliance, Vader stepped over to the turbolift and left the detention block, determined to find Obi-Wan Kenobi.

Once inside the turbolift, Vader allowed himself the brief luxury of pondering the incredible turn of events that his life had just taken. Yes, he would no doubt be reported by Tarkin for insubordination, possibly even sabotage, and certainly treason; but those things didn’t concern him. He had found his children. *Children! I have a son and a daughter*; he thought, a feeling growing inside of him that he had not felt in a life time: joy. *My son looks like me...* he reflected, remembering how he had once looked as a young man... *and my daughter looks like her mother... my angel...* the thought of his wife created a different rush of emotions within him, most of them dark, angry ones when he thought of how his master had lied to him, how he had told him that Padmé had died at his own hand. *Did she survive the birth of our children?* He wondered furtively. *Is she out there somewhere, hiding from me? Hiding from the monster I call my master?* It would make sense for her to do so, if indeed she were alive. *Kenobi will know*, he decided as the turbolift stopped. *Kenobi will give me the answers I need.*

The irony of the situation did not occur to Vader as he used the Force to track down his old master. Where once the thought of meeting up with Kenobi again would have only enraged him, and lead him to thoughts of killing his former friend; now all he wanted was answers.

He could feel the familiar Force presence of the old Jedi master clearly, and he knew that Kenobi was close by. Very close. He stopped, realizing that Kenobi must sense his presence just as clearly, and waited for the old Jedi to come to him. Within a few moments, he did just that.

“I’ve been waiting for you, Obi-Wan,” Vader said as Kenobi stood watching his former apprentice warily; hand on the hilt of his lightsaber.

“We meet again at last.”

Kenobi was confused by the reaction of the Dark Lord. The last time they had met had been at Mustafar, on that terrible, dark day so long ago. They had not parted on good terms, to put it mildly.

“Vader,” Kenobi said, his hand not leaving his lightsaber. “Have you come here to kill me?”

Vader wasn’t certain how to respond. “At one time, there was nothing more I wanted to do,” he admitted. “But right now, all I want is answers.”

Kenobi frowned, utterly confused. “Answers?”

“Yes,” Vader replied. ‘Don’t pretend you don’t know what I’m talking about, Obi-Wan,’ he added. “You brought the boy right here to me, surely you realized I would sense who he is.”

Kenobi nodded as he realized what Vader was talking about. “Luke,” he said simply.

“Yes, Luke,” Vader said, uttering his son’s name for the first time. ‘And his twin sister, Leia,’ he continued. “You have come here to rescue her, haven’t you?”

Kenobi nodded. “Yes, that was my plan,” he admitted. “But obviously you will see to it that i fail in my attempt.”

Vader shook his head. “Quite the contrary, old man,” he said. “I intend to see that you succeed.”

Chapter 6

Chapter 6

Kenobi wasn't certain that he had heard the Dark Lord correctly, and simply stared at him. "You... you are going to help me?" he asked incredulously.

Vader nodded. "For the sake of my children, I have no choice but to help you. I have already seen to it that they made it out of the detention block."

"They?" Kenobi said. "You mean, Han and Luke made it that far?"

"Yes," Vader replied. "Though I was something less than impressed with their plan, as well as with the arrogant man in their company, it did manage to succeed. At least so far."

"Where are they now?" Kenobi asked.

"They escaped down the garbage chute," Vader replied. "I'm sure they have found their way out by now. We must get to the docking bay," he said, taking Kenobi by the arm. "You will appear to be in my custody," he said.

"Of course," Kenobi replied, still bewildered by the unexpected turn of events. Yes, he had said that he had Leia's best interests at heart, but it could all be a ruse, a trap in order to capture them all with very little effort. "Just so long as this is only a ruse, Vader. I'm still not convinced that it isn't."

Vader stopped in his tracks and looked at the old man. "If I weren't sincere in my desire to help you, you would be dead right now, old man," he said darkly. "I promise you that. And if you do anything to jeopardize their safety, I will not hesitate to kill you. Do you understand?"

Kenobi nodded, realizing that despite his desire to help his children, he was still very much the Dark Lord of the Sith.

"Where is she, Kenobi?" Vader asked as he escorted the elder Jedi through the corridors at a brisk pace.

Kenobi knew what Vader was asking, but merely looked at him in response, unsure what to tell him at this point. "I don't know what you're asking..." he began.

"You know damn well what I'm asking," Vader replied, an edge of anger in his tone, his grip tightening on the old Jedi's arm. "Padmé, where is she? I know she didn't die, not like the emperor told me she did."

"How do you know that?" Kenobi asked.

"Because she gave birth to my children," Vader replied. "She did not die on Mustafar by my hand, as my master told me."

Kenobi was unnerved by this disclosure. Palpatine had lied to Vader in a most insidious way, telling him that he had killed his own wife....*is it any wonder he has lived in such darkness all these years..*

“No, she did not die at Mustafar,” Kenobi replied. “She did live to give birth to the twins. I was with her when they were born.”

Vader turned and looked at Kenobi sharply, a pang of jealousy ripping through him. *I envy you that, old man*, he thought, but said nothing. “Why were the twins raised apart?” he asked. “Where is she? What happened to her?”

“The twins were raised apart for their own safety,” Kenobi answered carefully. “As for what happened...” he stopped as he spotted Luke and Leia racing down the corridor.

Vader turned and saw them also, immensely relieved to see his children alive and well. When they saw Kenobi seemingly in the custody of Vader, both of them became outraged.

“Is this part of helping me?” Leia demanded angrily of her father. “By taking Obi-Wan prisoner?”

“I told you not to trust him,” Luke said, raising his weapon and looking at his father with hatred in his eyes. It made Vader’s heart ache to feel the hatred emanating from his son.

“He is not my prisoner,” Vader told them. “I am merely escorting him to your vessel.”

“Is that true, Obi-Wan?” Luke asked, not believing the Dark Lord for a moment.

Obi-Wan nodded. “Yes, it’s true,” he said. “So let us be off, shall we? Where are Captain Solo and Chewbacca?”

“We got separated,” Leia explained, feeling badly for having assumed the worst of her protector.

“There is no time to waste,” Vader said. “The shift change occurs in less than five minutes, it will be the perfect chance for you to all get safely to the ship.”

Leia nodded her understanding. “Okay, let’s go,” she said. “Lead the way,” she said to her brother.

“Right this way,” Luke said as he and Obi-Wan started off.

Vader held back, torn between his desire to follow his children and his need to stay behind and ensure that they got off the space station safely.

Leia turned to him before she followed the others. “I’m...sorry I thought the worst of you,” she said. “You have done everything to help me, and I should have known better than to assume that.”

Vader nodded, touched by his daughter’s apology. “I can understand why you would,” he said. ‘Now go,’ he said, putting a hand tentatively on her shoulder. “Before it is too late to do so safely.”

Leia nodded, the moment of parting more difficult than she’d ever imagined. “Come with us,” she blurted out, not even thinking about her request.

Vader shook his head. “You know I cannot do that, child,” he said, touching her face. “As much as I would like to.”

Leia frowned. "Why not?" she said. "Tarkin will have you executed when he learns of what you've done," she said.

"Perhaps," he said. "But if he does, it will be an honorable death, knowing I've seen to the safety of my children."

"Children??" Leia said. "What do you mean, children?"

"Luke is your twin brother, Leia," he told her. "Now please, I must insist that you go!"

"But I have so many questions," Leia protested. "There are so many things I need to understand, things I need you to explain!"

"There is no time!" Vader told her. "Go now, or I cannot guarantee your safety."

Leia nodded, realizing he was right. "Okay, I suppose I should," she said. 'Thank you,' she said, realizing she would probably never see him again. "I'll never forget you."

Vader nodded, his heart aching with emotion he never imagined he'd ever feel again. "Nor I you," he said. He looked up to see Solo and Chewbacca running toward them helter skelter.

"Here are your companions," he said. "Run."

Leia nodded and turned from him, trying to catch up with Han and Chewbacca, who were already on the ramp of the Falcon. She looked back one last time and over her father's shoulder saw the next shift of clones coming down the corridor. Terror filled her and she ran faster, her heart pounding in her chest. Suddenly the clones saw what was happening, and, not assuming that their commander had been somehow incapacitated and was unable to react, opened fire on the fleeing Princess.

Vader turned around to order them to cease fire when a shard of pain ripped through him via the Force. He turned back to see his daughter lying prone on the floor having been struck by blaster fire. Monumental anger filled Vader, and with a mighty swipe of one arm he sent the group of clones flying across the corridor, their armor clad bodies shattering against the bulkhead. He then ran to her, and picked up her body in his arms. *She's alive*, he realized, feeling her Force signature clearly. Without thinking about the consequences of his actions, he hurried aboard the Falcon, his unconscious daughter in his arms.

"Fire her up Chewie, let's get outta here!" Han shouted as he heard the freighter's ramp closing.

Obi-Wan and Luke hurried out of the cockpit to greet Leia and stopped in their tracks when they saw the giant Sith Lord tenderly cradling the princess in his arms.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7

“What have you done!?” Luke cried angrily. “Get your hands off of her!”

“She’s been struck,” he told them, ignoring his son’s hateful outburst. “She is alive, but needs medical attention.”

“This way,” Obi-Wan said, leading Vader to the medi-bed in the back of the hold. Vader ignored the look of shock on his son’s face and followed Obi-Wan.

“We’re not outta this yet, kid,” Han said as he entered the hold. ‘Sentry ships.’ He stopped cold when he saw Vader on board his ship. “What the hell are *you* doing here?” he yelled, drawing his blaster and approaching the Dark Lord. “Get the hell off my ship!”

“Rather difficult to do so since you are already air borne,” Vader replied, nonplussed by the young pilot’s indignation.

“Don’t let that stop you, Vader,” Han said, glaring at him with utter contempt.

“Han, don’t you have more pressing matters to attend to?” Obi-Wan suggested. “Sentry ships?”

“Yeah, let’s go kid,” he said, his eyes not leaving the dark lord until he turned and ran out of the hold.

Luke joined him and ran to the gunning pod opposite the one Han climbed into. He was unable to get the sight of the infamous and reputedly evil Darth Vader holding Princess Leia so tenderly in his arms, as if he truly cared, as if there were really a heart within his massive black armored chest. *That isn’t possible*, Luke told himself. *Darth Vader murdered my father, he isn’t capable of caring about anything or anybody*. He pushed the confusing thoughts and feelings away to focus on the task at hand, namely the TIE fighters that were bearing down on the Falcon with tremendous speed.

“It isn’t bad,” Obi-Wan determined as he checked the unconscious princess. “I think it looks far worse than it is.”

Vader nodded; relieved as he watched Obi-Wan stem the flow of blood in his daughter’s shoulder. Soon it began to slow down.

“I am grateful for your help, Vader,” Obi-Wan said. “I have to say I didn’t expect it.”

“No, I’m sure you didn’t,” Vader replied. “It was not my intention to help you, Kenobi. You simply happened to be at the right place at the right time.”

“Yes, I suppose I was,” Obi-Wan agreed. “Still, I do appreciate that you did the right thing.”

Vader was silent for a moment. “They are my children,” he said at last. “What did you expect me to do? Keep them prisoner? Let that madman Tarkin have at them?”

"To be honest I had no idea what to expect," Kenobi replied. "This has been a rather unexpected turn of events."

"Unexpected?" Vader retorted. "That is an understatement, old man. I have believed my child died twenty years ago before she was even born. I have lived with that pain, that guilt for two decades, and then in one day I come face to face with not only a daughter but also a son!" he stopped, the shock of it still new. And then a dark thought pushed the joy out, replacing it with cold, brutal reality. "Judging by their reactions to me, neither of them was told the truth about their paternity."

"No, they weren't," Kenobi replied. "Did you really expect they would be, given what happened on Mustafar?"

Vader did not reply, but Kenobi could feel the anger and pain surging through him at the mention of that dreadful day.

"I didn't expect anything," Vader said, looking down at his daughter. "I have no right to expect anything," he added.

Kenobi watched the Dark Lord, sensing the great conflict of emotions within him. Yes, Vader had acted to save his children's lives, no doubt acting on pure instinct as any father would when his young were endangered. But what now? How could he reconcile the path he had chosen with the one that his children had embarked upon?

"So now what?" Kenobi asked.

Vader looked up at him. "What do you mean?"

"Now that you know they are alive, what will you do?" Kenobi asked.

Vader was taken aback by the question. He had been acting on pure instinct, pure emotion ever since he first suspected that Leia was his child. He had not stopped to think of the future, or the consequences of his actions.

"I don't know," he replied truthfully. "I hadn't thought that far ahead."

Kenobi smiled. "Sounds like a young impulsive Jedi Knight I used to know," he said.

Vader shook his head. "That young Jedi died many years ago," he replied. "In the fires of Mustafar."

"Until today I believed that too," Kenobi admitted. "But now I'm not so sure. If there were no trace of Anakin Skywalker in you, why would you care about his children?"

"That name no longer has any meaning for me," Vader stated. *So why would you care about his children?* He could not deny that he did care; he would not be in this most unlikely situation if he did not. Vader looked down at Leia, who seemed to be coming around. She opened her eyes and was surprised to see her father by her side.

"I seem to have been made an unwilling passenger," he told her dryly.

Leia nodded. "So I see," she replied. "Welcome aboard."

Kenobi watched the exchange between father and daughter, the bond between them plain to see. *Astonishing*, he thought. *Not in a thousand years did I think this could happen.*

"You're safe now, Leia," Vader told her. "We have cleared the Death Star and will soon have you back with the Rebel Alliance."

"Thanks to you," she said. "I guess that makes you a Rebel too," she added, with a trace of a smile.

Kenobi couldn't help but smile at the irony of the situation. "Imagine that," he said.

Vader looked at Kenobi. "I'm glad you find this so amusing," he grumbled.

Kenobi's smile only grew. "Well even you have to admit that it is... ironic."

"We did it," Han stated proudly as he and Luke reentered the hold. "Took care of those Imperial bastards but good, didn't we kid?"

Luke only nodded the sight of Vader still disturbing.

"Guess your pilots don't have what it takes," Han said to Vader. "We finished them off pretty easily."

"No doubt," Vader replied. "But surely you realize that they let you go," he added, enjoying the look of outrage on the young man's face.

"Bullshit," Han retorted. "You might think the Imperial fleet is invincible, but I'm here to tell you it ain't, Vader," he said.

Vader was beginning to hate the young pilot, and the thought of snapping his neck had crossed his mind more than once. *But that probably wouldn't impress my children much...*

"Perhaps not," Vader replied at last. "But considering the fact that it is standard Imperial procedure to place a homing beacon on board any vessel captured, your daring escape is somewhat less than remarkable."

Han was about to respond, but Leia cut him off. "I suspected as much," she said, sitting up. "At least we still have the information in Artoo," she added.

"What's so important in that little droid?" Han asked.

"He's carrying the Death Star plans, isn't he?" Vader asked.

Leia nodded. "Yes," she replied, not sure how much information she ought to divulge.

"The station is flawed," Vader stated. "Despite the twenty years it took to construct."

"Flawed?" Leia asked. "You know this?"

Vader nodded. "I have studied the schematics thoroughly," he replied.

"Of course, that's how you were able to disable the primary weapons array," Leia reflected aloud.

"You disabled the Death Star's weapons array?" Luke asked in astonishment.

"Tarkin was going to annihilate Alderaan," Vader told his son. "I was not going to allow that to happen."

“What do you care what happens to Alderaan?” Han asked. “I figured you’d be only to happen to see another few million people killed. Isn’t that how you get your kicks, Vader?”

It took all of Vader’s self control not to lash out at the brash young man. He turned to him slowly, the anger simmering just under the surface. “My reasons for saving Alderaan are none of your concern,” he said. “Perhaps you ought to return to your cockpit where you actually have some small degree of capability.”

Han strode over to the dark lord, who stood up to meet the bold young pilot.

“You wish to say something to me, Captain?” Vader asked threateningly, towering over Han.

“You’re damn right I do,” Han retorted angrily. “This is my ship, you got that? *My ship*. The fact that you saved the princess back there means jack squat to me; you’re still the same bastard who has cut a path of murder throughout the galaxy. Don’t think that your small act of mercy today has anyone here fooled.”

“That’s enough, Captain Solo,” Leia spoke up at last.

“Han is right,” Luke spoke up. “Did you know that you’re....friend here murdered my father?”

Vader was stunned, feeling as though someone had reached inside of him and ripped out what was left of his heart. He turned to Obi-Wan, furious with the old man, realizing that, more than likely, it had been him who had told his son the heinous lie. “Is *that* what you told him?” he demanded angrily. “That I *killed* his father?”

Kenobi did not know what to say. He had not exactly expected that the boy would come face to face with his father this way.

“Are you actually going to deny it?” Luke demanded hotly when Kenobi made no reply.

Vader turned back to his son, the hatred he saw in his son’s eyes that were so like his own cutting through to his very soul.

“I did not kill your father, Luke,” Vader began simply.

“Don’t believe a word he says, Luke,” Han cut in.

“Captain Solo, this does *not* concern you,” Leia spoke up. “You have no idea what you are talking about!”

“Like hell I don’t!” Han replied hotly. “I don’t know what kind of sorcery he’s worked on you, sweetheart, but I don’t buy his benevolent act for a nanosecond. And if you do, then you’re a bigger fool than...”

“Don’t say another word,” Vader said, grabbing Han roughly by the front of his jacket. ‘You will not speak to my daughter in such a manner!’ he warned. “Not if you value your life, Solo.”

Han’s eyes grew wide. “Your *daughter*?” he asked, looking at Leia. “He’s your father?”

Leia sighed. “Yes, he is,” she replied quietly.

Luke looked at Leia in shock, and then at Obi-Wan. “Ben?” he asked, the confusion evident in his voice. “Tell me the truth, please. I need to know the truth.”

Obi-Wan looked at the young man, and then back at Vader. *Now what?* He thought.

“I will tell you the truth about your father, Luke,” Vader spoke up, to the surprise of all. “Since it is obvious that Kenobi here is incapable of it,” he added, giving Kenobi a hard look.

“Your version of the truth? I don’t know if I want to hear it,” Luke said. “Besides, what *do* you know about my father?”

“I *am* your father, Luke,” Vader told him at last. “That is the truth.”

Chapter 8

Chapter 8

Luke looked at the Dark Lord, an expression of utter disbelief on his face.

"But... how... why... how can you be my father?" he cried. "You are the enemy of the rebellion! A murderer! My father was a great Jedi! I don't believe you!!" he cried, backing away.

Leia sighed. "Luke, he is telling the truth," she said. "You and I are twins."

Luke looked at Leia, shocked by her revelation. "But... how can this be?" He turned to Obi-Wan. "Why did you lie? What did you hope to gain by it?"

Obi-Wan grew uncomfortable at the young man's indignation. "I didn't entirely lie, Luke," he said in self-defense. "Anakin Skywalker, your father, was seduced by the Dark Side, and became Darth Vader. So in a way, Vader *did* kill your father.

"Hardly the same thing as murder, though," Vader put in hotly. "Is it Kenobi?"

Luke turned his eyes back to Vader, the pain and disappointment in them clear. "Why?" he asked simply. "You were a hero, a Jedi? Why did you do it? Why did you throw all that away? Why weren't you the father I always wanted, the father I always needed?" he asked, and then left the room, heading for the cockpit.

Han gave one last look at Vader. "For the record, I don't believe a damn word you've said," he said, shaking his head in disbelief. He turned and followed Luke into the cockpit.

"It is bound to be a tremendous shock to the boy," Obi-Wan said. "Give him some time to accept it."

Vader nodded, not wanting Kenobi to see how deeply Luke's words had cut him. *Why weren't you the father I always wanted, the father I always needed?* "Perhaps if he had been told the truth in the first place he would not have such a hard time accepting it," he said to Kenobi, his voice laced with angry resentment.

Kenobi nodded, acknowledging his own culpability. "Perhaps," he replied. "But what's done is done. I cannot take back what I said."

"He will accept it in time," Leia said. "I will speak to him."

Vader turned to her. "Have you accepted it?" he asked.

Leia looked up at him. "Not entirely," she replied truthfully. 'I am truly grateful to you for everything you have done, but I still I have so many questions,' she replied. "I know that you are telling the truth, though. I don't know how to explain it, but I...I just know."

Vader nodded. "Just as I knew you were my child even before I did the blood analysis," he told her.

Leia was silent, wanting to ask so many questions, needing so many answers. “Why did you do it?” she asked, voicing the same question her brother had moments earlier. ‘Why did you turn to the Dark Side? I know you loved my mother,’ she told him. “That fact is clear to me. So why did you do it? Why did you give up your life with her to be Palpatine’s henchman?”

Her words bore no malice, much to Vader’s surprise; yet they still struck at his heart, even in their simplicity.

“It was not as simple as that,” Vader told her. “The emperor led me to believe that the Dark Side would enable me to save your mother. I was so desperate to do so that I believed him.”

“Save her from what?” Leia asked. “I don’t understand.”

Vader sighed. *Where do I begin?* He thought. *How do I tell you of the agony I went through for her?*

“All my life I have been plagued with dreams,” Vader told his daughter. “Portentous dreams. I foresaw the death of my own mother in a series of nightmares spanning over many months. After that, I learned to fear my dreams.”

“You dreamed of the death of my mother?” Leia asked.

Vader nodded. “They began on the day she told me that she was pregnant with you and Luke. What started off as the happiest day of my life soon turned into the most terrifying, as that very night I dreamed of her dying in childbirth.”

Leia was chilled by her father’s words. “That must have been terrifying,” she said quietly.

“It was,” Vader replied simply. “And because of that recurring dream I became obsessed with finding a way to save her.”

“And you thought that the Dark Side would enable you to do that?” Leia asked, starting to understand.

“Yes,” Vader replied. “I allowed myself to be manipulated by Palpatine, who had managed to hide his true nature, that of Sith Lord, from everyone, including the Jedi.”

“How was that possible?” Leia asked Obi-Wan. “How could that have happened? I thought the Jedi were stronger than that.”

“Palpatine managed to use the Dark Side shield himself from us,” he replied. “By the time we realized who he truly was, it was too late for us to stop him, or his apprentice,” he said, looking at Vader.

Leia was stunned by this disclosure. It hardly seemed possible that the notorious Darth Vader, the heartless, ruthless monster, could have been motivated by love to become what he had.

“I knew nothing of your dreams, Anakin,” Kenobi said, not even bothering to correct his slip.

Vader turned to him. “Of course not. You knew nothing of my marriage to Padmé. Why would I tell you of my nightmares about her?”

Kenobi nodded sadly, realizing Vader was right.

“Was that your name?” Leia asked. “Anakin?”

“Yes, at one time,” Vader admitted. “But Anakin Skywalker died long ago. His life ended when he lost his angel.”

Leia shook her head, utterly devastated to learn of the tragedy that had befallen her birth parents. “You truly loved her, didn’t you?” she asked.

“With every fiber of my being,” Vader replied. He was silent for a moment, speaking of his wife this way had reopened the wounds he had carried for the two decades since her death. ‘I sacrificed everything to save her,’ he said at last. “Everything. But in the end I lost her anyway, she died, just as I foresaw in my dream. The emperor lied to me, he used me, he used my love for her and my desperate need to save her to gain my allegiance, to purchase my servitude.”

Kenobi listened to Vader, astonished by the acrimony he now felt towards his master. Was it possible that Vader finally saw Palpatine for the evil monster that he was?”

“The emperor is and always has been, pure evil,” Kenobi stated, half expecting Vader to rise up in anger.

Leia nodded, her emotions raging through her. “He took everything from you,” she said to Vader. “Everything! You see that now, don’t you?”

“I see it all too clearly now,” he replied. “If only it hadn’t taken me a lifetime to do so.”

“That is true,” Kenobi replied. ‘But you have seen it, and that is what is important,’ he pointed out. “You have seen what he did to you and Padmé, and to your family, how he used you to destroy the Jedi, destroying the good man you once were in the process. The question is, what are going to do about it?”

It was the second time that Kenobi had asked the question, and Vader had no more answers now than he had earlier.

“What indeed,” Vader mused thoughtfully. ‘My son hates me, resents me. He’s right to feel that way, you both are,’ he said, looking at Leia. “I wasn’t there for you, for your mother.”

“Why? Why weren’t you there for us?” Leia asked. “Why were my brother and I separated at birth?”

Vader looked at Obi-Wan. “You and Luke were hidden from me,” he said. “I nearly died on the day you were born, and believed you had died along with your mother before you were born. I had no knowledge of your existence until just the other day. Had I known you were alive; things would have been so different. But what is done is done, and there is no way I can change the past.”

“Why did you hide Luke and me?” Leia asked Kenobi. “Why did you take us from our father?”

Kenobi was surprised by her question, surprised she even needed to ask. “Why do you think, Leia?” he asked. “Your father had turned to the Dark Side; he was an agent of the

emperor. If he had claimed you and Luke as infants, you would have fallen to the same fate that he had.”

“You don’t know that for sure,” Leia countered. “Perhaps the knowledge that we lived would have made a difference in him, changed him.”

“Perhaps,” Kenobi acknowledged. “But none of us were willing to take that chance.”

“It has made a difference now,” Leia pointed out, looking at her father. “Hasn’t it?”

Vader couldn’t deny that he had changed since learning of the existence of his children. “Yes,” he replied. “Undoubtedly. Though I’m not certain what that change will mean, Leia. It is not easy to begin life anew,” he reflected somberly.

“It is never too late for a fresh start,” Leia told him.

Vader looked at her. “I’m afraid it is for me, Leia,” he told her. “No doubt your leaders will be pleased to have me in their custody. I do not expect to be shown any mercy.”

“They will be merciful if you help us,” Leia told him. “You know the Death Star’s layout thoroughly; you even know its flaws. Help us to destroy it, tell us how. That will go a long way towards gaining their trust.”

“Not to mention Luke’s,” Obi-Wan put in, knowing that it was only his children’s trust that Vader craved.

Vader considered this. He really did not care if the Rebellion accepted him; but the fact that the Death Star would be tracking them right to the Rebel base, where it would annihilate them all, including his children, made his decision to help them somewhat academic. What choice did he have? His life was now forfeit anyways, no matter what he did. He had committed treason by helping the rebels to escape; no doubt the emperor had already received a full report on his treacherous activities. Besides, if it enabled him to earn the trust of his children, it was well worth doing.

“I will help you,” he said at last.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9

Before much longer the Millennium Falcon reached the Yavin System, and, having dropped into sub light, made its approach to the fourth moon of the second planet of the system.

“No doubt the Rebel leaders will be most relieved to see you, Princess,” Obi-Wan told Leia. “But they will be less than pleased to see who we’ve brought with us.”

Leia nodded, looking up at her father. “Well, we’ll just have to ensure that everyone realizes he is on our side now,” she said.

Vader was encouraged by his daughter’s words, but still could not help but think that the Rebel leaders would not be quite as sympathetic, no matter what he had done to save both Alderaan and his children.

“Here we go,” Han said as he entered the hold. He looked at Vader. ‘Hope you enjoyed the ride,’ he said dryly. “Cause things are going to get bumpy from here on in.”

“I’m sure they will,” Vader replied. “I am prepared.”

“Sure you are,” Han muttered under his breath as he and Chewbacca went back to lower the ramp. Luke, who had spent the duration of the voyage in the cockpit with Han and Chewbacca, entered the hold at this point. He looked at Vader, and then at Leia, still in a state of shock over the latest disclosures.

“So what’s going to happen now?” Luke asked his sister. “Don’t you think your leaders are going to have a problem with...him?”

Leia stood up. “I’m sure they will,” she replied. “Until he shows them how to destroy the Death Star.”

“You really expect him to do that?” Luke retorted.

Vader was growing annoyed with the manner in which his son was speaking, as though he were not even present. “I have given Leia my word that I would,” he interjected. “And that seems to be good enough for her.”

“Come on,” Leia said, not wishing to be drawn in to an argument between her father and her brother. “We have a job to do.”

Vader and his son looked at one another wordlessly, and then Luke followed Leia off of the ship

“Give the boy a chance,” Obi-Wan advised Vader as he stood beside him.

“He hates me,” Vader stated.

“Perhaps right now,” Kenobi said. ‘But Leia doesn’t hate you,’ he said, turning to look at Leia. “Does she?”

“No,” Vader replied. “Not any more.”

“Then don’t give up on Luke so quickly,” Kenobi suggested. “Anything is possible, I have learned that today,” he said with a smile.

Vader nodded. “Yes, that is true,” he conceded.

Leia was greeted by the leaders of the Rebellion when she disembarked, who were most relieved to see her alive and well. However when they saw the very man who had held her prisoner on board the Death Star join her, their relief soon turned to shock.

“What the...” Admiral Willard sputtered. ‘What the devil is he doing here?’ he demanded. He turned to Leia. “Princess?? Did he coerce you to taking him here?”

“No,” Leia told him at once. ‘I know this seems most unusual, but I owe him my life,’ she told the astonished admiral. “Not only that, he prevented the destruction of Alderaan. Tarkin would have blown it to bits if Lord Vader hadn’t sabotaged the primary weapons array.”

Willard looked from the young woman up to the Dark Lord, scarcely able to believe her. “I can’t believe what you’re telling me,” he said. “You’re defecting, Vader? Is that what all this means?”

Vader wasn’t quite sure how to respond. “I have personal reasons for my actions,” he said simply. “But now is hardly the time to discuss them. The Death Star is on its way here, and I can promise you that they will not miss their opportunity to level this planet to bits unless you act fast.”

“You have the plans?” Willard asked Leia.

She nodded. “Better than that, we have someone who already knows where the Death Star’s weaknesses are,” she said. She turned and looked up at her father. “And is willing to show us how to exploit them.”

Willard frowned. “Is that so?” he said. “And how do we know that what he tells us is the truth, and not a way of us digging our own graves? He could be easily feed us misinformation and we’d not know it until this planet was blasted into space dust.”

“You are welcome to study the schematics for yourself,” Vader told him, “if you believe I am lying. That is, if you have the time to spare.”

Willard was torn between his need to set the attack into motion and the fear that Vader was indeed laying a trap.

“He’s not lying,” Leia averred. ‘I know it’s hard to believe or even to understand, but he is on our side, Admiral,’ she said. “I would bet my life on it.”

“We’d all be betting our lives on it, Princess,” Willard replied dryly. “If you don’t mind, I’d like to have a look at these plans myself. Lord Vader can show me what he knows.”

Vader nodded. “Very well,” he said. “Lead the way.”

“Luke!”

Luke turned to see Obi-Wan Kenobi approaching him. He had avoided the old Jedi since he had learned the truth of his father's identity, and still resented Kenobi for lying to him as he had.

"We need to talk, Luke," Kenobi said.

"More lies?" Luke replied coldly.

Obi-Wan shook his head. "No, only the truth this time, I swear."

Luke stood and looked at the old Jedi. "What do you want to tell me?" he said. "How much my father loves me? How he has spent the past nineteen years searching the galaxy for me?" he asked sarcastically.

"I know how angry you are, Luke," Obi-Wan replied. "And you have every right to be. I never should have lied to you the way I did, but I did it to protect you."

"Protect me?" Luke replied. "From what? The truth?"

"Yes, the truth," Obi-Wan replied. 'You were not ready to bear the burden of the truth,' he explained. "But now that you know it, I must explain to you the circumstances which lead your father to make the decisions he did. I have only recently been made aware of those circumstances myself."

"What circumstances are you talking about, Ben?" Luke asked tiredly. "What could possibly justify a father abandoning his children the way he did?"

"The fact that he thought those children had perished along with their mother before they were born," Kenobi replied. "The fact that he only recently discovered that those children were actually alive, and that he had been lied to for the past twenty years by someone he trusted, namely his master, the emperor Palpatine."

Luke was taken aback by this information, and was silent for a moment as he digested it. Yes, that would explain why Vader had been absent from his children's lives until recently. But the more pressing question still remained unanswered. Why?

"Why did he turn to the dark side then?" Luke asked. "Why did he trust someone as evil as the emperor? He was a Jedi! How could he put his trust in someone who stood for everything the Jedi fought against?"

Kenobi sighed, realizing that at this point he must admit to his own failures, his own inability to see what was happening to the man who he had once called brother. "Palpatine did not always appear to be evil, Luke," he explained. "For many years he was the Chancellor of the Republic, and was considered to be a fair and benevolent leader. It wasn't until your father began to fear for your mother's life that Palpatine started to lure him to the Dark Side."

Luke frowned. "My mother? What did she have to do with this?"

"Everything," Kenobi answered. "Your father was not supposed to marry, being a Jedi; and so he and your mother married in secret. When your father learned of her pregnancy, he began to have visions of her dying in childbirth. These visions drove him to the point of desperation, and, not knowing where else to turn, he succumbed to the lure of the Dark power that Palpatine offered him. You see, Palpatine lead your father to believe that he could save the

life of your mother through the Dark Side, and your father, so desperate to save her, believed him.”

Luke was astonished by this revelation, and was rendered speechless for a moment. *My father loved my mother so much that he sacrificed his soul to save her?* “He... he turned to the Dark Side to save my mother?”

Kenobi nodded. “Yes,” he replied. “I did not know any of this until today, when Vader told your sister. He kept it to himself, letting it eat away at him until it destroyed him, along with the Darkness that he allowed to claim him. If only I had known, if only he had confided in me... perhaps things could have been different.”

Luke was silent as he listened to the old man’s tragic tale.

“I know you are angry right now Luke,” Kenobi said again. “But I thought you needed to know this. I hope it makes a difference.”

Obi-Wan turned and left Luke at this point, letting him ponder what he had just learned.

Leia, Vader and Willard proceeded to the command center along with the little astromech droid, R2D2 in tow. Vader kept turning and looking at the little droid, starting to feel as though he had seen him before.

“What is the designation of that droid?” he asked his daughter.

“R2 D2,” she replied. “Why do you ask?”

Vader nodded. “He and I used to make quite a team,” he told her. “He was my companion on many missions during the Clone Wars.”

“Really?” Leia asked in amazement. ‘What an incredible coincidence!’

“Not really,” Vader replied. “It was the property of your mother, after all. It is not that surprising that it became part of your household.”

“What about his counterpart? C3P0?” Leia asked .

“I built that droid when I was a boy,” Vader replied. “He was meant to help my mother around the house.”

Leia was about to respond when they entered the command station, and more pressing matters were immediately pushed to the foreground. A technician hooked up Artoo to a computer terminal and activated the play back mechanism, downloading the information stored on the disc into the computer for analysis.

“It’s the thermal exhaust port,” Vader told his daughter as the technicians, Admiral Willard and General Dodonna pored over the data. “It’s relatively unprotected.”

“How could we destroy it?” she asked.

“One proton torpedo blast would start a chain reaction that should destroy the station. A small one man vessel would be able to access the port,” he told her, folding his arms over his chest. “Your fleet has ships that small, I’m certain of it.”

Leia nodded. “Yes we do,” she said. “Where is it? This port?”

“Below the main exhaust port,” he told her, watching as the rebels pored frantically through the huge amount of data. ‘It will take them hours to find it,’ he told her. “Fools,” he added, shaking his head.

Leia nodded. “I know,” she said. “But you have to understand their point of view; you’ve not given them any reason to believe you. They don’t know you as I do.”

Leia’s comment surprised him and he turned back to her. “I appreciate your belief in me, Leia,” he told her. “It means more to me than I can express.”

Leia smiled. “I have an idea,” she said. She stood up and walked over to the group of technicians. “Check the exhaust port,” she told them.

They looked up at her, and then located the area on the schematics. They examined the area in question, talking in low tones among themselves. Then they looked up at her. “This is it,” they told her. “How did you know?”

“Lord Vader told me,” she said. ‘That’s how,’ she added, looking up at General Dodonna. “Now can we get this battle under way?”

Dodonna nodded, glancing over her shoulder at Vader briefly. “Yes, let’s get everyone together for a briefing. We have no time to lose.”

Leia and Vader ran into Luke and Obi-Wan in the corridor.

“Well?” Obi-Wan asked.

“We found it,” Leia told them. ‘Come on Luke,’ Leia said, taking his hand. “There’s no time to waste. You’re a pilot, right?”

Vader and Obi-Wan walked behind the twins. Vader seemed deep in thought.

“I spoke to Luke,” Obi-Wan told Vader. “Everything you told Leia earlier, I told to him.”

“And?” Vader replied. “Did it make any difference?”

“He was quite shocked, of course,” Obi-Wan replied. “But yes, I think it has made a difference. Surely you sensed a change in the boy when he spoke to you just now.”

Vader had sensed a change, but was reluctant to even consider what it meant. “Yes,” he admitted. “I did.”

“Patience,” Kenobi said. ‘I know that has never been one of your strengths,’ he added wryly. “But you really must try to be patient with the boy.”

“I will try,” he said.

General Dodonna waited until the assembly of pilots and technicians were silent before he began.

“The battle station is heavily shielded and carries firepower greater than half the star fleet,” he began. “Its defenses are designed

around a direct large-scale assault. A small one-man fighter should be

able to penetrate the outer defense.”

Vader stood beside Leia, annoyed at the pomposity of the General, who seemed content to take credit for the key information. He looked over the crowd of young pilots, and saw his son watching him. He held Luke's gaze for a moment, sensing within his son a small level of acceptance, a perceptible decrease in the amount of hostility Luke harbored. Luke looked away and returned his attention to the briefing.

"Pardon me for asking, sir," asked one of the squadron leaders. "But what good are snub fighters going to be against that?"

"Well, the Empire doesn't consider a small one-man fighter to

be any threat," Dodonna replied, keenly aware of Vader's presence, "or they'd have a tighter defense. An analysis of the plans provided by Princess Leia has demonstrated a weakness in the battle station."

Luke continued to listen to the General's analysis, his eyes drifting every so often over to where Leia stood with Vader. They made such an odd looking pair; the tiny white clad princess standing beside the huge black armored Sith Lord; and yet even from where he was sitting, Luke could sense the bond between them. Every so often Leia would say something to him, and Vader would bend his head close to hear her.

"That's impossible, even for a computer," the young pilot seated beside Luke declared upon hearing the description of the plan of attack given by the general.

"It's not impossible," Luke replied. "I used bull's-eye womp rats in my T-sixteen back home. They're not much bigger than two meters."

"Then man your ships! And may the Force be with you!" Dodonna concluded.

"Such a maneuver would be easy for the Chosen One," Kenobi commented to Vader as he and Leia watched the pilots file out of the room.

"It isn't likely the Rebel Alliance would trust me with one of their craft," Vader replied.

"The Chosen One?" Leia asked. "Is that what you were called?"

"Your father is the one spoken of in Jedi prophecy," Kenobi explained. "The greatest of all the Jedi, the one who will bring balance to the Force and destroy the Sith."

Leia looked up at her father. "Is that true? Do you mean to destroy the Sith?"

Vader remained silent for a moment. "I am not certain what my destiny is any more, Leia," he admitted. He stopped when he saw Luke approaching them. He wore the orange flight suit of the Rebel fleet. Vader couldn't help but feel a surge of pride when he saw his son.

"Luke!" Leia said, embracing her brother. "Be careful out there, okay?" she said.

Luke smiled. "I will," he replied.

Leia looked around him. "Where is Han?" she asked.

"He took his reward and left," Luke said, the disappointment evident in his voice. "I really thought he'd change his mind."

"Captain Solo must follow his own destiny, Luke," Vader said. "As we all must."

Luke nodded, looking up briefly at the Dark Lord. "I suppose so," he said simply.

"Use the Force, Luke," Obi-Wan advised. "Let it guide your actions."

Luke nodded as he released his sister. He looked up at his father.

"May the Force be with you," Vader said.

Luke was about to say something in response, but decided against it. He simply nodded in response, and then turned and left them.

Vader watched him go, his heart torn between the pride he felt at seeing his boy embarking upon his first battle, and the fear that this same battle would claim the life of his only son.

"Come on," Leia said, taking her father's arm. "Let's go."

Chapter 10

Chapter 10

"I'm Luke Skywalker," Luke said as he reached the area where the x-wing pilots had gathered. "I was assigned to this squadron."

"Did you say Skywalker?" the squadron leader, a man in his forties asked as he approached Luke.

"Yeah," Luke said, eying the man suspiciously. "Why?"

"Any relation to Anakin Skywalker?" the man asked.

Luke nodded. "My father," he said simply.

"I remember him from the Clones Wars," the squadron leader explained. 'Helluva pilot, best I've ever seen,' he said. "If you're half as good as he is, kid, you'll be pretty damn good."

Luke simply nodded as he watched the man walk away. Pieces of the puzzle that had been his father's life were slowly falling into place; creating a picture of a man that Luke would have given anything to know. *But that man is gone now*, Luke thought somberly as he made his way to the craft that had been assigned to him. *Destroyed by the Dark Side*.

"Hey, your Artoo unit seems a bit beat up," the technician who was serving Luke's ship told him. "You want a new one?"

Luke smiled as he climbed the ladder up to the cockpit. "Not on your life," he replied. "This little Artoo unit and I have been through a lot together. You okay Artoo?" he asked. The little droid whistled a most definite affirmative. "Good," Luke said as he settled into the cockpit.

Obi-Wan, Leia and Vader headed for the command center, where a large schematic of the battle was displayed. The Death Star, represented by a red dot, was growing closer to the Yavin System. Soon an ominous announcement was heard over the loudspeaker. *Stand-by alert. Death Star approaching. Estimated time to firing range, fifteen minutes.*

Leia looked up at her father at this alert. "They're almost here," she said.

Vader nodded. "It will be close," he said. "Let us just hope that your efforts are not in vain."

Soon the sound of chatter was heard over the loudspeaker as the pilots all reported in.

Look at the size of that thing! One pilot gasped as he caught sight of the enormous space station.

Cut the chatter, Red Two, he was cautioned by the squadron leader.

Accelerate to attack speed. This is it, boys!

Vader watched the skirmishes as they were represented on the giant display before him, remembering all too well the exhilaration of being in the heart of such a battle. He reached out into the Force, searching for the distinctive, brilliant aura of his son. He could feel the boy's excitement, his fear and anticipation as the battle heated up. *The Force will be with you, Luke*, he told his son, knowing that the bond between he and Luke already existed.

High above the Death Star, Luke heard his father's words. The voice in his head was not the menacing, mile-deep baritone that he had come to associate with the Dark Lord. No, this was a different voice; the voice of his father, his *real* father, the man who had loved his mother, who had been a great Jedi. Luke shook his head, as though to shake the thoughts from his head, and refocused on the battle.

"They've passed the magnetic field," Leia said. She looked at the position of the Death Star on the display. "We're running out of time."

Vader nodded. "Red squadron must proceed," he said. "They are in the best position to reach the port. Gold squadron...." He stopped as he felt a great wave of terror emanating from his son. "Luke..." he uttered, grasping the edge of the display tightly. He closed his eyes, trying to determine what his son was going through.

"What is it?" Leia cried. "What is wrong?"

Vader was silent for a moment. Luke had come close to being engulfed in a fireball on the surface of the Death Star, but he was okay. He made it.

"He's alright," Vader told her. "A close call, but he's fine."

At that moment they heard Luke's voice over the battle chatter. "I got a little cooked but I'm okay."

Leia sighed with relief, amazed by her father's ability to sense Luke's feelings from so far away.

"TIE fighters," Vader said as they saw a new group of ships enter the schemata. "They must split up," he told Leia. "And engage those TIE fighters ship to ship."

It was soon apparent that the fighters had been spotted, and soon the pilots in both squadrons were engaged in dog fights above the Death Star's surface. The activity on the display map was chaotic, laser fire from ships as well as the surface guns everywhere. Chatter on the loud speaker was loud and chaotic as well as the pilots did their best to cover one another and stave off the enemy attacks.

Leia could feel the fear within her growing as the Death Star grew closer, as the battle above it increased in intensity and pitch. Despite her best efforts to do so, she could not stop thinking that if Han Solo had remained with the Rebellion, he would have made a huge difference in the battle; despite the fact that he was an arrogant, money hungry nerf herder, he was also a great pilot.

"Gold Five to Red Leader. .. Lost Tiree, lost Dutch..."

"I copy, Gold Five."

"They came from behind..."

“They mustn’t waste all their pilots in one run,” Vader told his daughter.

“What do you suggest?” Leia asked.

“I would reserve half of the squadron,” he told her. “Cover the trench and hold off those TIE fighters. It will give them a chance at least to reach the objective.”

Leia nodded, impressed and even a little proud of her father’s battle savvy. She looked at General Dodonna who had been listening, despite trying to appear not to. He reflected on Vader’s suggestion, and then nodded. At once he made contact with the squadron leaders.

“Red Leader, this is Base One,” he announced. “Keep half your group out of range for the next run.”

“Copy, Base One. Luke, take Red Two and Three. Hold up here and wait for my signal... to start your run.”

Leia looked up at her father and smiled. “Good call,” she said.

“I’ve been in a few battles in my life,” Vader replied simply.

“Yes, I’m sure you have,” Leia replied, returning her attention to the battle scene in front of them. Two X-wings moved across the surface of the Death Star. Red Leader’s X-wing dropped down to the surface leading to the exhaust port.

“This is it!”

Everyone held their breath as Red Leader entered the trench and began his run.

“I’m in range.”

Leia and Vader watched as Red Leader’s X-wing moved up the Death Star trench.

“Target’s coming up! Just hold them off for a few seconds.”

“Look,” Leia said in alarm as they spotted three TIE fighters move in formation across the Death Star surface.

Vader nodded. “They are headed for the trench,” he said. Sure enough, no sooner had Vader said the words, then the three TIE fighters zoomed down into the trench at breakneck speed. Red Twelve’s X-wing fighter was hit by laser fire, and it exploded into flames against the trench.

“You’d better let her loose!” the panicked voice of Red Ten was heard over the intercom as he desperately tried to hold off the fighters that were rapidly approaching.

“Almost there!”

“I can’t hold them!” Red Ten replied, and soon his death screams were heard as his ship was hit from behind. It exploded and bursts into flames.

Red Leader continued his run, approaching the target rapidly. Soon he reached it, and fired his proton torpedo.

“It’s away!”

Everyone in the command room watched with bated breath, waiting for the explosion to follow.

“It’s a hit!” Red Nine’s voice exclaimed excitedly.

“Negative,” Red Leader announced, his voice heavy with disappointment and frustration. “Negative! It didn’t go in. It just impacted on the surface.”

Leia released the breath she didn’t realize she’d been holding. She looked up at Vader. He turned and looked at her, wishing he had some words of comfort to offer her. Instead he merely put a hand on her shoulder. “There’s still time,” he told her.

Leia nodded and they both returned their attention to the battle.

Luke’s voice was the next one they heard on the intercom. “Red Leader, we’re right above you. Turn to point... oh-five; we’ll cover for you.”

Red Leader’s voice was heard next.

“Stay there... I just lost my starboard engine. Get set to make your attack run.”

The next sound was one of Red Leader’s screams as his ship was hit. And then, after a moment of shocked silence, Luke’s voice was heard once again. He spoke with calm authority that made his father proud.

“Biggs, Wedge, let’s close it up. We’re going in. We’re going in full throttle,” he said.

“Right with you, boss,” Wedge replied.

The two X-wings took off at tremendous speed and dove into the trench “Luke, at that speed will you be able to pull out in time?” Biggs asked.

Vader couldn’t help but smile to himself when he heard his son’s response. “It’ll be just like Beggar’s Canyon back home.”

“Sounds like a young pilot I used to know,” Obi-Wan commented, looking up at Vader.

Vader nodded. “Just as reckless,” he muttered.

Obi-Wan chuckled.

The three X-wings move in, unleashing a barrage of laser fire.

Laser bolts were returned from the Death Star.

Luke could feel the exhilaration as he realized that it was now up to him and his friends: the battle was in their hands.

“We’ll stay back far enough to cover you,” Biggs told him.

Flak and laser bolts flashed outside Luke’s cockpit window as he continued.

“My scope shows the tower, but I can’t see the exhaust port! Are you sure the computer can hit it?” Wedge asked doubtfully.

Luke looked around for the Imperial TIE fighters. He thought for

a moment and then moved his targeting device into position. "Watch yourself! Increase speed full throttle!" he ordered Wedge.

"What about the tower?" Wedge asked.

"You worry about those fighters!" Luke told him. "I'll worry about the tower!"

In the command center Vader watched the progression of his son's vessel, feeling the sense of expectation, of exhilaration that his son was experiencing.

"Artoo... that, that stabilizer's broken loose again!" Luke's voice was heard. "See if you can't lock it down!"

It gave Vader some small degree of comfort to know that Artoo Detoo was there to help his son. The little droid had always been very resourceful in tight situations, and this was no exception as he worked furiously to repair the damages.

Laser cannons fired on the fighters as they continued on their way, Luke's fighter in the lead. The TIE fighters in pursuit of them were deadly in their aim and accuracy, and soon Wedge found himself in a difficult position.

"I'm hit! I can't stay with you," he told his comrades.

"Get clear, Wedge," Luke told him. "You can't do any more good back there!"

"Sorry!" Wedge replied apologetically.

The three Imperial pilots allowed him to escape, concentrating their efforts on Luke. Luke's X-wing sped down the trench as the three TIE fighters in perfect unbroken formation, trailed close behind.

"Be careful, Luke," Leia murmured, her anxiety level growing higher the closer the TIE fighters got to her brother's craft.

"Hurry, Luke," Biggs cautioned him. "They're coming in much faster this time. I can't hold them!"

Leia moved closer to her father, as though seeking his comfort. He was as anxious as she was, for the TIE fighters were moving in ever closer to Luke. Managing to squeeze a tiny more power out of his engines, Luke put on a burst of speed, moving a little further away from his pursuers, giving him a little breathing room. Biggs, however, was not so lucky, and in a matter of moments, he was blown to the stars by the relentless Imperial fighters. Luke was all alone.

Vader could feel his son's devastation at the loss of his friend. But, on the heels of the sadness, Vader sensed another emotion. Anger.

"It's all up to Luke now," Obi-Wan said. "He's the only one left."

Vader looked down at his daughter, sensing in her the same trepidation he himself felt. "The Force is strong with him," Vader told her. "He will make it."

"I hope you're right," Leia said softly. She looked down at the display where she saw the TIE fighters gaining even more ground on her brother's ship. Silently she and Vader watched

as Luke's ship streaked through the trench of the Death Star. Ever in pursuit of the quarry, the three TIE fighters charged away down the trench toward Luke.

Vader reached out to his son, realizing that it was all up to him now. *Use the Force, Luke,* he told his son. *You can do it... I know you can... let go and let the Force guide you.*

Luke heard his father's voice again, but was unsure if he ought to follow his advice. He looked through the targeting sites once more, adjusting the controls.

Luke, trust me.

Luke was startled by how easily his father could communicate with him. He could feel the sincerity of his words, and made his decision. Reaching for the control panel, Luke pressed the button and the targeting device moved away.

At once a voice was heard on the intercom. *His computer's off. Luke, you switched off your targeting computer. What's wrong?*

And then Luke's voice was heard, calm and full of confidence. "Nothing. I'm all right."

Vader smiled to himself, pleased that his son had heeded his words. He looked down at Leia. "Don't worry, Leia," he told her. "Your brother knows what he's doing."

Leia could only nod in response and hope her father know what he was talking about. She looked down at the display and watched as

Luke's ship streaked ever close to the exhaust port. Behind him the three TIE fighters followed him in close pursuit. Suddenly a large burst of laser fire engulfed Artoo. The little droid made a squealing sound and became inoperative.

"I've lost Artoo!" Luke cried.

Leia, Vader and the others stared intently at the projected screen, as

lights representing the Death Star and targets glow brightly. Over the intercom, an ominous announcement was heard.

The Death Star has cleared the planet. The Death Star has cleared the planet.

Leia and Vader look at one another, bracing themselves for the worst. Tentatively Vader reached over and took his daughter's hand, half expecting her to pull it away. She did not, and squeezes her father's hand back as they waited for what seemed like an eternity, the battle in the trench above them raging on as Luke continued to race to the exhaust port.

Out of no where, another ship entered the display. It fired upon the center TIE fighters, causing its pilot to lose control and go spinning out into space as the wingmen crashed into the sides of the Death Star trench. Then the familiar voice of Han Solo was heard over the intercom, to the utter surprise of all, and secret delight of Leia.

"You're all clear, now let's blow this thing and go home!"

Luke fired his torpedoes toward the port, using the Force to guide him. He moved out of the trench, smiling to himself as he realized that they had found their mark. He sped away from the Death Star, seeing the Millennium Falcon close by. They and the handful of Rebel

ships made their way back toward the Yavin moon as behind them the mighty Death Star exploded in a spectacular display of light.

“Great shot kid, that was one in a million!” Han exclaimed.

Well done, young one Luke heard the voice of his father say. *The Force is strong with you, my son.*

Luke was oddly pleased to have his father’s admiration, and hurried back to the moon of Yavin, feeling as though the course of his life had just changed irrevocably.

Inside the command center, the mood was jubilant. Cheering and shouts of excitement were heard from all quarters, even the staid and serious generals were seen clapping one another on the back.

Vader stood amid the celebration, feeling more relief than anything else. The fact that thousands of clones, hundreds of officers, many of whom he had served with were dead now didn’t bother him at all. In fact, if he were honest with himself, he would have to admit to being glad that Tarkin and his band of cronies had been blown into space dust.

Leia turned to her father, after receiving hugs of congratulations from the other Rebel leaders in the room. “We did it,” she said to him. “Largely thanks to you,” she added.

Vader shook his head. “Your brother is the hero here, Leia,” he said. “Not I. He’ll be back soon, why don’t you go out and meet him? I’m sure you are anxious to see him and your Corellian friend, Captain Solo.”

Leia blushed ever so slightly at her father’s suggestion, but merely nodded her head. “I’ll be back soon,” she told him, and then hurried out of the room to greet the returning heroes.

Obi-Wan watched the exchange between Vader and his daughter, still amazed by the change that his children’s presence in his life had caused in the Dark Lord.

“Luke will make a strong Jedi,” Obi-Wan said tentatively, not quite sure how Vader would react.

Vader turned to him. “Luke’s destiny is his own,” he said. “I will have little impact upon it.”

Obi-Wan frowned. “Why do you say that? You’re the boy’s father.”

“Yes,” Vader replied, looking over Obi-Wan’s shoulder. “But I am also a wanted man.”

Obi-Wan turned and looked behind him to see a group of heavily armed Rebel soldiers approaching. “They can’t do this,” he said. “This is wrong, terribly wrong.”

Vader made no reply, but simply watched as the soldiers approached, him, realizing that the moment of truth was upon him.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11

Vader watched as the soldiers approached him, feeling their terror at the thought of arresting the infamous Sith Lord. Kenobi was not sure what would happen next; either Vader would lose his temper and kill them all where they stood, or he would submit. *I suppose it depends upon who is winning the struggle within him, Anakin Skywalker or Darth Vader*, he mused.

“Darth Vader, you will surrender your weapon and come with us,” the leader of the group announced, a man not much older than Vader’s own children.

“On whose authority are you making this arrest, Captain?” Obi-Wan asked.

“General Dodonna’s, sir,” the young man replied. “Lord Vader is wanted on a number of charges, I have the order right here with the details.”

Vader was unsure what his course of action ought to be. Part of him wanted to take his lightsaber and kill every last one of them; but he was out numbered at least ten to one, and no doubt they would merely open fire on him if he so much as reached for his weapon. Secondly, he did not know where Kenobi’s loyalties lie. He could very well join the rebels, adding his own weapon to theirs. *And then there are my children...*

“Drop your weapon,” the man ordered again, motioning for the rest of his group to surround the Dark Lord. They did so, their weapons trained upon him tightly.

“Go along with them,” Kenobi advised. “I will tell Leia what has happened, and this will all be cleared up, I’m certain of it.”

Vader wasn’t so convinced. He had no intention of remaining a prisoner, but the rebels had taken him by surprise, and he needed time to formulate a plan. Finally he unclasped his lightsaber and handed it to the young man, who almost collapsed with relief.

“Let’s go,” he said with a little more bravado now that Vader was unarmed. “This way.”

“I knew you’d come back, I just knew it!” Luke cried as Han Solo joined Luke and Leia in the docking bay.

“Well I wasn’t gonna let you take all the credit and get all the reward,” Han quipped as he tousled Luke’s hair affectionately.

“I knew there was more to you than money!” Leia told Han, smiling up at him brilliantly.

Just then Artoo Detoo was lowered from Luke’s vessel. He was charred and seemingly out of commission. See Threepio was beside himself upon seeing his stout little companion in such rough shape.

“Oh my!” he cried. ‘Artoo! Say something! You can repair, him can’t you?’ he asked a nearby technician who was removing the clamp from Artoo. “You must repair him! Sir if any of my circuits or gears will help I’ll gladly donate them!” he told Luke bravely.

Luke had to keep from laughing at the protocol droid’s dramatics. “He’ll be alright,” he told Threepio.

The three left the droids and began to make their way back to the command center.

They were met half way there by Obi-Wan Kenobi.

“Congratulations, Luke,” the old Jedi said with a smile.

Luke smiled. “Thanks Ben,” he said. “I couldn’t have done it without Han here, though,” he said, looking at the pilot.

Kenobi nodded. “Yes, I understand you arrived right in the nick of time, Captain Solo,” he said.

Han shrugged. “I guess so,” he said. “I’m just glad I’m here for the party,” he added with a smile.

“Indeed,” Obi-Wan replied. “Leia, a situation has arisen that requires your attention I’m afraid.”

“Right now?” she said. “What’s the problem?”

“General Dodonna has ordered the arrest of your father,” Kenobi replied. “They just took him into custody.”

“What?” Leia cried. “Where did they take him?”

“I’m not certain,” Obi-Wan replied. “I don’t need to tell you what could happen if your father is provoked,” he added.

“No, you don’t,” Leia replied quietly. She looked up at Luke. “We have to do something,” she said, not entirely expecting her brother to agree with her.

Luke merely nodded. “What can be done?” he said. “He’s an enemy of the Rebellion, after all.”

“He is, but he also helped us all escape, saved Alderaan, and showed us how to destroy the Death Star,” Leia countered. “Those things should count for something.”

“I didn’t say I don’t agree with you, Leia,” Luke replied calmly. “I’m just not sure there is much we can do.”

Leia thought for a moment. “Where is General Dodonna?” she asked Obi-Wan.

“In the command center, as far as I know,” he replied. “What do you hope to gain by talking to him?”

“I’m not sure,” Leia said. “But I at least have to try. I’m not going to let my father go through this on his own, not after all he’s done for me.”

Kenobi nodded, reflecting just how very much Leia was like her mother at this moment. "I'll come with you," he said.

Vader found himself in a most unusual position, that of prisoner, for the first time in more years than he could remember. Granted, he could have easily repelled the rebels' attempt to apprehend him by killing the lot of them with a single thought; but somehow that didn't seem right to him anymore. Somehow the knowledge that his children were part of this Rebel Alliance prevented him from lashing out at the group of soldiers, and this surprised even him. Not that he planned on remaining a prisoner; no, that would not do. He simply needed a moment to plan an escape, and then... *and then what?* he reflected. *Where do I go? The emperor will surely kill me when he learns of what I have done; and knowing that serpent Tarkin, Sidious received a full report on my recent activities.*

"In here, your lordship," one of the men said, opening a door and pushing Vader inside the small cell. Vader bit back the anger that filled him at the young man's sarcastic tone. 'It's not terribly comfy in here,' the man continued as he and three of his companions stepped into the room. "But I'm sure it's a lot more so than the cell my brother rotted away in on board your vessel, Vader."

Vader turned and looked at the man. "I have no memory of your brother," he said simply, stating a fact. "I have many prisoners on board my vessel at any given time."

"Yeah, I'm sure you do," the man retorted angrily. "And you treat them all the same way, right? Like so much human garbage."

"This is war," Vader replied. "What do you expect? I don't imagine the Rebel Alliance treats its prisoners with any greater degree of clemency."

This angered the young man even more, even though it was not Vader's intention to provoke him. "What do you say we show Lord Vader how the Rebel Alliance treats its prisoners?" he asked his comrades.

"Sounds good to me," one of the other men said, brandishing his weapon. Vader realized what was afoot, and looked around at the four men as they surrounded him.

"Surely you're not foolish enough to actually try to harm me," he warned them. "For that would be a grave mistake."

"Harm you?" one of the men said. "Now why would we want to do that?" he said, punctuating his sentence with the butt end of his blaster to Vader's ribcage.

Vader felt the pain rocket through him and tried to focus his energy on anticipating the next assault, but the pain made it difficult to do so. In a moment he felt something connect with the small of his back. He grew furious as the pain rushed through him, and with one swipe of his arm Force pushed the assailants against the wall. The other two stood their ground, at least until he turned to them.

"I did warn you," he growled as he reached out his hands, choking each of them with the Force. The men grabbed at their throats, their faces turning blue, eventually falling to their

knees. Vader watched them as they struggled for air, the anger in him fuelling his strength and his power.

“Fools,” he said contemptuously as the men slumped to the floor, dead. He looked around at the other two men who lay unconscious, or perhaps dead, (he didn’t know and didn’t really care at this point). Reaching a hand out, he removed his light saber from the grasp of one of the men. The weapon flew to his hand, and he caught it easily. *Now what?* He pondered as he stared at the force field protected door that stood between him and freedom. He folded his arms over his chest and pondered his next move, knowing that he did not have a lot of time to make his move.

“General Dodonna, a word with you please,” Leia said as she met up with the general in the command center.

Dodonna looked up to see Princess Leia standing before him along with Obi-Wan Kenobi.

“What can I do for you, Princess?” he asked.

“I think you know what,” she replied. “Why have you arrested Darth Vader?”

Dodonna lowered his brows. “Why?” he asked. “Do you really need to ask me why? He’s a mass murderer, Leia; a monster! Surely you haven’t been fooled into thinking otherwise.”

“You seem to forget what Lord Vader has done recently,” Leia retorted. “He saved Alderaan from certain destruction; he saved my life more than once, and helped me escape from the Death Star. And you know very well, General, that it would have taken you hours to find the weakness in the Death Star if he hadn’t pointed it out to us first.”

“I can’t deny any of that, Princess,” Dodonna replied evenly. “But stacked against his acts of murder and tyranny....”

“Darth Vader was once a great Jedi; did you know that, General?” Obi-Wan cut in. “Does the name Anakin Skywalker sound familiar to you?”

“You’re trying to tell me that Darth Vader was once Anakin Skywalker?” Dodonna replied in disbelief.

“Yes, I most certainly am,” Kenobi replied. “And judging by your reaction to his name, you are familiar with his exploits.”

“Anakin Skywalker was one of the greatest heroes the galaxy has ever known,” Dodonna replied. “He was a great pilot, a brilliant warrior; of course I’m familiar with them.”

“So consider the number of times he sacrificed his life for the galaxy,” Kenobi said, surprising himself with the vehemence with which he was defending Vader. “The number of times he turned certain defeat into victory, the number of lives he saved. If we use your... unusual brand of logic, and stack these deeds against the misdeeds of Darth Vader, which do *you* think would come out on top?”

“That is hardly a valid comparison,” Dodonna protested hotly.

“Why not?” Leia countered. “That’s exactly what you’re doing, isn’t it?”

Dodonna grew angry at being trapped so easily in their logic. “Perhaps it is,” he said at last. “But that doesn’t mean Vader deserves to be shown mercy. He is a dangerous man, Princess, and you’d be wise not to let this... strange infatuation you have with him blind you to that fact.”

Leia grew furious. “Infatuation?” she cried. “Is *that* what you think I feel toward him?”

“Well what else would you call it?” Dodonna cut in.

“Darth Vader is...” Leia began, but Obi-Wan cut her off.

“Darth Vader is a changed man,” he said, thinking that it would be unwise for Leia to reveal her true relationship with the Dark Lord. “And Princess Leia has seen the change in him first hand. Surely he deserves some degree of clemency, General; after all, the Alliance is not the same ruthless body of dictators that the Empire is, is it?”

“I don’t think I like your tone, General Kenobi,” Dodonna retorted. “Or what you are implying. Darth Vader will remain a prisoner of the Alliance, and if either of you have a problem with that, you are welcome to end your association with this alliance.”

“General, I hardly think that...” Kenobi began, ever the diplomat.

“You have a lot of nerve saying that to me,” Leia replied angrily. “After everything that Alderaan has done for the Alliance, after the way I risked my life to get these plans to you!”

“Leia, come along,” Obi-Wan said. “Obviously we will need to speak to the general when cooler heads have prevailed.”

Leia looked at the Jedi, and then back at Dodonna, and, reluctantly, let Obi-Wan escort her from the room.

“Why did you do that?” she asked.

“Because your father needs your help,” he said. “Let’s go.”

Chapter 12

Chapter 12

Leia and Obi-Wan hurried through the corridors, trying to formulate a plan. It would not be easy to get Vader safely off the moon, but Leia was determined to do so. She was adamant to the point that Obi-Wan had commented to her how much like her father she was.

“Am I really?” she asked, stopping and looking at the old Jedi.

“Yes, you are,” he replied. “Anakin was always very single minded, very difficult to dissuade from doing something when he was convinced he was right.”

Leia smiled. “Sounds like he and I would get along famously,” she said.

She saw her brother and Han Solo approaching and ran to meet them.

“What’s going on?” Luke said. “Is...he still in the brig?”

“Yes,” nodded Leia. “And you’re just in time to help me get him out.”

Han frowned. “You’re going to let him out?” he asked incredulously. “Are you nuts??”

“No, I most certainly am not nuts,” Leia retorted. ‘He helped me escape, he helped all of us,’ she told the cocky young pilot. “We owe him .”

Han shook his head in disbelief. “Well count me out, sister,” he said ruefully. ‘You want to get yourself court marshaled you go right ahead. Come on, kid,’ he said, turning to leave. “Kid?”

Luke stood looking at his sister, trying to decide what to do.

Leia could see her brother’s hesitation, and took him by the hand. “Luke, he’s our father,” she said. “Whatever else he has done, he is our father, our flesh and blood. He has come so far to change, and if we abandon him now, all that will be for nothing. I don’t want that to happen, do you?”

Luke shook his head. “No,” he said. “Of course not.”

“I want to meet Anakin Skywalker,” Leia said. “I want to know him, the great hero, the man who sacrificed everything for the love of a woman, our mother. That man is inside of him, I’ve seen glimpses of him. If we help him, if we support him, he will find his way back, I just know it!”

Luke was moved by his sister’s words, and looked at Obi-Wan. “Ben?” he said. “What do you think? Is there a chance he could be turned back to the good side?”

Kenobi nodded. “Yes Luke,” he said. “I never would have imagined it possible, but I do believe it. It has already begun.”

Luke had to admit that he too had seen the changes, felt the good man within the Dark Lord. How could he turn his back on that man?

“Okay,” Luke said at last. “Tell me what to do.”

Vader had commenced pacing in his cell, like an animal in a cage, his mind working furiously to find a way out. The thought that perhaps his daughter might come to his aide had crossed his mind, but no doubt she would take great risk to do so, and he did not wish her to endanger herself.

His thoughts turned to his son as well, his pride for him filling him with an unusual warm feeling. *This is what it feels like to be a father*, he realized. Both of his children had given him reason to be proud. *Padmé would have been proud of them too*, he thought, the image of her face jumping unheeded to his mind. *I did not kill her*, he thought, the knowledge of it still a shock to him. *He lied to me*, he thought as his thoughts grew dark. *I swore my allegiance to him; I sold my soul to him... all for a lie, all for nothing...*

Vader knew his master well enough to know that by now there was an enormous bounty on his head. Sidious did not take betrayal lightly, and that is exactly how he would see what Vader had done. The irony of his situation was not lost on him. In saving his children he had burned all bridges with the Empire, and put himself in the position of an enemy of that Empire; yet, the Alliance which he had delivered his daughter too also considered him their sworn enemy. So, in essence, he was without allies, a man without a future. He had sacrificed everything to save his daughter... just as he done so twenty years earlier to save her mother. *But you were unable to save Padmé...this time you did it, this time you did save the one you love.*

Vader’s musings were interrupted when he sensed a tremor in the Force. At once he realized what it meant; his children were close by. He looked around at the carnage he was surrounded by; would they believe him when he said he was provoked to kill the four men whose bodies lay obscenely around the cell? *We shall soon see*, he thought as he heard the door being deactivated. He stepped back as the door slid open, revealing his daughter and son.

“Leia, Luke,” Vader began, not at all surprised to see them. “What are you doing here?”

“What do you think?” Leia replied. “We’re here to...” She stopped when she saw the four dead men within the cell. Suddenly she was filled with a cold sense of anxiety. *What am I doing?* She thought. *Was Dodonna right? Is my father beyond redemption?*

“They attacked me,” Vader told his children, seeing the look of horror and shock in their eyes. “I complied with their requests, but they saw fit to try to inflict bodily harm upon me. I acted in self defense.”

Luke and Leia looked at one another. They wanted to believe their father, but his predilection for violence made it hard to do so.

“If you doubt me,” Vader spoke up, “the security holos will verify what I have told you.”

“The security cameras!” Leia suddenly remembered. She looked up and saw that the recording device was pointed towards the ceiling at a most unusual angle. She looked back at her father for an explanation.

“I... thought perhaps it was a wise precaution,” he explained, “given the fact that the two of you must not be implicated in any of this.”

Luke smiled. "Very thoughtful," he commented. "Any ideas how we can get you out of here without anyone seeing us?"

"You lead the way," Vader replied. "And leave the rest to me."

"You're not going to just kill everyone we encounter, all you?" Luke asked with a frown.

"I will only kill if I must," Vader replied. 'The Force will cloak us when necessary.' He sensed his children's reticence. "Perhaps you'd like to reconsider your involvement," he suggested.

Leia shook her head. "No," she said, grabbing her father's hand. "You risked everything to save us, now we're going to do the same for you. Come on!"

The recentness of the Rebel victory worked in the favor of the fugitives, for most of the personnel were in the great audience hall celebrating. Leia, being familiar with the layout of the base, managed to find the less populated corridors and passageways to the docking bay where Obi-Wan had arranged to meet the three of them.

"Where will you go?" Luke asked his father as they made their way through the winding corridors.

"I do not know," Vader replied. 'I will not return to the Empire,' he told them. "I could not even if I wanted to. My recent actions have made me a wanted man. And it is obvious that your Rebel leaders are unwilling to consider that a man can change."

"So what will you do?" Leia asked.

"I must find out what happened to your mother," Vader replied. The fate of his wife had been gnawing away at his mind ever since he learned that she had not died at his hand. "I want to learn the truth about her death, and if there was any way it could have been prevented."

"What do you hope to gain by knowing that?" Luke asked. "Isn't it sort of like pouring salt on an open wound?"

Vader was silent as he considered his son's question. "I have lived with the pain of her death for close to twenty years, Luke," he replied at last as they entered the hangar. "There is nothing that can rival that pain, not anymore. I must know the truth if I am ever to know peace."

"I will tell you the truth, Anakin," Obi-Wan said as he watched the exchange between Vader and his children.

Vader looked at his old Jedi. "What do you know of truth, old man?" he retorted. "How can any of us believe you after the way you...."

"Padmé did not die in childbirth, Anakin," Kenobi cut in.

"What?" Leia cried.

"What happened to her?" Luke asked. "Where is she??"

"I don't know where she is," Obi-Wan replied. "But I promise you that she did not die when the two of you were born."

Vader stood as though his boots had become adhered to the floor beneath them. He could feel his heart pounding in his chest, the blood pounding in his ears.

"If she did not die," he began, "then why were the twins taken from her and raised apart? Who did that to her?" he demanded.

Obi-Wan looked up at Vader. "She had serious complications when the twins were born," he told him. 'And very nearly did die. Due to the complications she slipped into a coma for weeks, and the doctors did not give her much hope of surviving. That is why the twins were taken.'

"You left her alone?" Vader asked furiously. "You stole her children from her and then left her alone to die?" he roared, taking a step towards Obi-Wan.

"Stop, please!" Leia implored, trying to hold her father back. "I'm sure that wasn't what happened!"

"No, it was not," Kenobi replied. 'Yoda remained with Padmé while Bail Organa and I took the twins to a safe hiding spot. Time was of the essence; we knew that if Palpatine learned of their existence, he would have taken the twins and destroyed them. We couldn't take that chance.' He looked at Vader who stood listening silently to Kenobi's tale. "I returned to see her, to the medical facility at Polis Massa as soon as I could, only to find that she was gone. None of the doctors there would tell me where, for she had sworn them all to secrecy. All they would tell me was that she believed the babies had died, and no one there told her otherwise. Apparently Master Yoda felt that if she knew that they were alive she would have tried to search for them, and would have endangered all three of them in the process."

Vader was silent as he digested all this information, his mind racing in a thousand directions. *Was she alive? If she was, where was she? What did the belief that her babies had died do to her?*

"Stand aside, Obi-Wan," Vader said at last as he headed for one of the rebel ships.

"Where are you going?" Leia cried, running after him.

Vader turned to his children. "I am going to find your mother," he replied. "If she is alive, I *will* find her, I promise you that."

Luke and Leia were torn; they wanted desperately to go with their father, to help him search for their mother. And yet they both felt a sense of duty and obligation to the Rebel Alliance, and felt compelled to do everything they could to help it.

"When I find her, I will bring her home to you," Vader said, touching his daughter's face. "I swear it."

Leia nodded. "I know you will," she said. "Good luck, Father."

Vader was moved, hearing his child call him father for the first time.

"May the Force be with you, Father," Luke said.

Vader turned to his son next and put a hand on his shoulder. "And with you, my son," he replied.

And then without another word, he proceeded to the nearest ship and climbed on board. He stopped when he noticed Obi-Wan climbing into the cockpit of the neighboring ship.

“What are you doing, old man?” Vader asked.

“You’re going to need some help,” Obi-Wan replied. “Besides, how far do you think you’ll get looking like the most notorious man in the galaxy?”

Vader paused, not having given any consideration to that. He was nothing if not infamous.

“And what do you suggest?” Vader asked at last.

“You’ll just have to wait and see,” Obi-Wan returned with a grin.

Vader shook his head. “I should have killed you when I had the chance,” he grumbled.

Obi-Wan only chuckled as both men climbed into their fighters and prepared to leave.

Chapter 13

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Luke and Leia managed to return to the festivities without raising suspicion that they had been involved in the escape of Darth Vader. Of course it wasn't long before it was discovered that the Dark Lord had indeed escaped. The bodies of the four dead soldiers brought a new level of outrage and hatred for the Empire, as had the apparent abduction of the elderly Jedi, Obi-Wan Kenobi who had disappeared with the Dark Lord.

General Dodonna had strongly suspected that Leia was involved in the escape of Vader, but he had no proof. He had checked the security holos from that afternoon when the escape had been affected, but the camera showed nothing, it having been dislodged somehow, no doubt during the scuffle that took the life of the four soldiers.

The footage of the scuffle that had resulted in the death of the four rebels shocked the general. It was clear from the footage that Vader had been provoked, that the rebels had taken sadistic pleasure in taking cheap shots at him. The Dark Lord had obviously snapped and had unleashed his enormous power to retaliate. Dodonna shook his head, confused by what all this meant. Clearly Vader could have killed all ten of the men who had apprehended him; but he had not. He could have resisted arrest quite easily, and yet he had not. And the holos clearly showed that he did nothing to harm the men who had imprisoned him until they had brutalized him first. Who would not fight back under such circumstances? Granted, the manner in which Vader had retaliated had been a hundred times more lethal than the manner in which he had been attacked, but after all, he was a Sith.

Dodonna had not been able to stop thinking about what Obi-Wan Kenobi had told him, how Darth Vader had once been Anakin Skywalker. It hardly seemed possible that the sinister black masked menace had once been the dashing, heroic young Jedi. *Wait a minute...* Dodonna thought. *Skywalker? Isn't that the name of the new recruit? The one who destroyed the Death Star? Could there be a connection?*

"General, we're ready to commence," Dodonna's young aide told him as she poked her head into his small, makeshift office.

"Very well," he replied. "I'll be right there."

Imperial City-Coruscant

The galactic Emperor Palpatine had not reached the position he had by being merciful. No, indeed it was his ruthlessness and cold-bloodedness which had seen him hold the position for two decades. As Vader had suspected, the late Governor Tarkin had indeed sent a complete report to the emperor before the Death Star had been blown into stardust. Palpatine's initial reaction had been one of shock to his apprentice's treachery. Darth Vader had been a dutiful servant for two decades, and Palpatine knew exactly how to keep him subservient. Early on in his service to the emperor, Vader had been far more emotional, far more demonstrative of his grief over his dead wife. But Palpatine had bullied that out of the Dark Lord. He had used the

images from Vader's tortured mind to torment and punish him whenever he dared to as much as think of *her* in his master's presence. Vader had learned his lessons well, enduring the agony both physical and psychological frequently until he was conditioned not to even think of her name in Palpatine's presence. Once he'd been broken, Vader had proven to be a faithful servant, doing his master's bidding without question. Until now.

It seemed unthinkable that Vader would act against his master's wishes, and blatantly disregard orders issued to him by his superiors, namely Tarkin. But he had. Not only that, he had aided the traitor Organa in her escape, the security holos were full of it. *What was it about this princess that made Vader throw away everything to save her? Why was she important to him?*

"Your majesty, Vyr Zhar-Khan is here to see you."

Palpatine looked up at the aide, shaking himself from his dark ruminations. "Send him in," he commanded.

Vyr Zhar-Khan was one of the most notorious and efficient hired guns in the galaxy, and Palpatine had used his services on many occasions. There was something more about this young man that Palpatine had noted though; he was Force sensitive. Granted, the young man had never received any training, nor had he been shown how to wield his latent powers; but they were there nonetheless. His aura sparkled with the promise of tremendous strength, a source of virtually untapped potential. *A fine apprentice he would make*, Palpatine reflected as the young man was shown in.

"You sent for me, your majesty?" Zhar-Khan drawled in his thick Hapan accent.

"Yes, I did," Palpatine replied. 'I want you to find out the name of the Rebel who destroyed the Death Star,' he told the young man. "Moreover, I want you to find out all you can about the Princess Leia Organa of the house of Alderaan. I want to know everything you can about her, including any possible connections she may have to my former apprentice, Darth Vader."

Zhar-Khan raised one dark eyebrow. "*Former* apprentice?" he asked.

"Yes," Palpatine replied. 'I have placed a bounty on his head so high every bounty hunter in the galaxy will be looking for him,' he gloated. "He will pay for his treachery," he said, more to himself than to the young man before him.

"Anything else, sire?" Zhar-Khan asked.

"No," Palpatine replied. "Return to me in one month's time, Zhar-Khan. Do you hear me? One month."

"Now, my lord, have I ever let you down in the past?" Zhar-Khan asked with a smile.

Palpatine was not amused by the dashing young man's attempts to be charming. "Get out," he simply said, dismissing him brusquely.

Zhar-Khan bowed with a great flourish and then left.

Don't fail me, Zhar-Khan, or your head will be the next to have a bounty on it.

Rebel Base-Yavin System

Luke, Han, and Chewbacca entered the huge ruins of the main temple. Luke could feel his palms growing sweaty, his mouth dry as the moment drew closer.

Han looked at him and grinned. "You're not nervous, are you kid?"

"Me? Nah," Luke replied, yanking at the collar of his jacket. "Not a chance."

Han merely smiled, knowing better.

The fanfare began, and the three heroes started their way down the long aisle towards the dais, where Princess Leia stood, looking radiant in a flowing white gown.

Hundreds of troops, lined up in neat rows watched as the heroes proceeded down the aisle. Banners were flying, the atmosphere formal and dignified.

Luke and the others solemnly marched up the long aisle and stood before Leia. General Dodonna and several other dignitaries were seated to the left of Princess Leia. She rose and placed a gold medallion around Han's neck. He winked at her, causing the princess to almost lose her composure. She then repeated the ceremony with Luke, her twin, who merely smiled up at his sister. They both bow respectfully to the princess and then turned to face the assembled troops. The mood of formality was shattered by a spontaneous and boisterous round of applause, followed by cheers and loud shouts of approval. Leia could help but laugh.

Luke turned back to her and gave her a wink before he and Han returned to the assembled troops to receive their congratulations.

Leia watched part of her wishing she could join her brother and their friend, but realizing that her position made it inappropriate. She was a princess, after all. *But am I really?* She thought, reflecting on her true parentage. *As much as I love Bail Organa, he is not my real father...*

"Quite a celebration," General Dodonna commented as he came to stand beside Leia on the dais.

Leia turned to him. "Yes, and deservedly so," she replied. "It was a resounding victory."

Dodonna nodded, his eyes on the troops before them. "You may have heard that our prisoner managed to escape," he told her, his tone of voice not changing at all, as though he were discussing the weather.

Leia did her best to appear shocked. "What?" she replied. "You mean Vader?"

"Who else do you think I mean?" Dodonna retorted, looking directly at her. Leia, however, kept her cool.

"Your tone is quite inappropriate, general," Leia said in her most regal, royal manner.

Dodonna was properly chastised, and bowed his head to her. "Forgive me," he said. "But it is quite a coincidence, don't you think, that he managed to escape only a short time after you were protesting his arrest. Curious." He said no more and walked away. Leia kept her face impassive, realizing that he was no doubt watching her closely for a reaction. *And he shall*

have none, she thought to herself as she watched her brother shaking hands with the other pilots.

Subterrel Sector— Wild Space

Darth Vader found himself in a reflective, pensive mood as he and Obi-Wan made their way to Polis Massa. Vader had reasoned that it was a logical place to start, since it was the last known location of his beloved Padmé. From there, he had no idea where to go. But Obi-Wan had made a valid point: he would not get far so long as he wore the all too recognizable mask of Darth Vader.

Vader had never once considered that his injuries were repairable; his master had told him that they were not, and he had taken him at his word. But Sidious had also told him that Padmé had died at his hand... *it seems in your anger you killed her...* And that was a lie. *A lie that I have spent the past two decades grieving over....a lie that changed the course of my life...*

"Anakin, do you read me?" Vader heard Kenobi's voice over the comm..

"Do not call me that," Vader replied tersely. "That is not my name."

Kenobi was silent for a moment before responding. "I'm preparing to make the reversion to sub light," he said at last. "Polis Massa is approaching."

"Acknowledged," Vader replied.

Vader and Obi-Wan landed their craft on the landing platform outside the medical facility. Polis Massa was a unique outpost, a gravity controlled series of facilities built on a group of asteroids in the Subterrel System in what was usually referred to as Wild Space.

Kenobi remembered the outpost well; he had brought the unconscious Padmé Amidala Skywalker here after his fateful duel with Darth Vader on the planet of Mustafar. Fearing for her life, as well as those of her unborn children, the physician at the medical facility had induced labor. Padmé had endured a painful, physically traumatic labor and delivery, her emotional condition only serving to augment her already delicate physical state.

Vader climbed out of the fighter and looked around. *So this is where my children were born*, he thought.

"This way," Kenobi said. "They will no doubt be surprised to see you, so let me do the talking, alright?"

Vader nodded, anxious to get to the truth of his wife's fate. If that meant following Kenobi around and letting him call the shots, for now, then so be it.

Kenobi entered the facility, the Dark Lord close behind.

"This way," Kenobi said, indicating a blast door that led to the administrative wing.

No one could have prepared the administrator of the facility, a rather mild-mannered man by the name of Runali Vullen, for the sight that met his eyes when the door to his small office opened. He stood up, half expecting to be arrested and taken into custody when he saw the infamous Darth Vader enter the room. He was accompanied by an elderly man who wore the robes of the now extinct Jedi Knights.

“W-w-what brings you to our remote outpost, Lord Vader?” Vullen asked with an appropriate degree of groveling.

“I have come for information about a patient of yours,” Vader replied without preamble. “You will tell me all you know about Padmé Amidala Skywalker.”

Chapter 14

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Polis Massa Outpost

Vullen simply stared at Vader, the Dark Lord's request taking him completely off guard. Padmé Amidala Skywalker was a name from the past, a name that everyone at Polis Massa had learned not to react to. It had been almost twenty years since the beautiful, mysterious woman who had once been known as Padmé Amidala Skywalker had simply left the facility, not telling anyone where she was going or why. So why now was Darth Vader looking for information about her? Despite himself, Vullen found himself curious.

"I'm sorry, what name was that?" he asked.

"You heard the name," Vader replied tersely. "And I know you recognized it, your mind is ridiculously easy to read."

Vullen began to grow uneasy under the Dark Lord's scrutiny. How could he deny knowing this woman if Vader could read his very thoughts with seemingly no effort at all?

"Perhaps you could check your databanks," Obi-Wan suggested, subtly using the Force to manipulate the man's mind.

"Yes, why don't I check the databanks," Vullen said, moving to his computer screen at once. He called up the historical files on the computer and watched as a bank of names appeared on the screen.

"I don't see that name in our files," Vullen said. "Do you know how long ago would she have been here?"

"Almost twenty years," Vader said. "She gave birth to twins while she was here, a girl and a boy."

Vullen nodded as he adjusted the perimeters of his search.

"Master Yoda may have removed the records from the databanks," Obi-Wan realized suddenly. "In order to protect her from being found by the emperor."

Vader nodded. "Yes, that is most likely," he said, discouraged by this realization.

"We have a record of twins being born nineteen point eight years ago," Vullen said. "But the name of the mother is not in the files. It appears to have been removed."

"Perfect," Vader growled. *So now what??*

"Is there anyone here at the facility who might remember these twins?" Obi-Wan asked. "Anyone at all? Even a droid?"

"Well, we could check with the personnel in the maternity ward," Vullen suggested. "They might, but it's been a long time. We have a lot of babies born here. It would be a long shot at

best.”

“It is better than nothing at all,” Vader replied. “Let us proceed.”

“Very well,” Vullen said, standing up. “Follow me.”

“May I ask why this woman is of importance to you, Lord Vader?” Vullen asked timidly. “Is she a criminal? A fugitive of the Empire?”

“No,” Vader replied at once. “She is not.”

Vullen waited in vain for the Dark Lord to offer more information, but he did not, causing his own curiosity to increase. Vullen’s life was not a terribly exciting one; and as such he was not often afforded the opportunity to play a part in a true mystery. *This is just like that holovid I watched the other night; he thought excitedly, only this one is real! Who was this mysterious woman that Darth Vader was so bent on finding? What connection did she have to him? And what of the twins she bore? What became of them??*

“Here we are,” Vullen announced as they stepped through the blast doors leading into the maternity ward. “Let me introduce you to our chief physician here,” he added, summoning a female humanoid.

Talanis Deece was not a native of Polis Massa, but had been practicing medicine there for a number of years. She was a stout woman in her early to mid fifties. As she turned to approach the administrator, she was unable to hide the look of fear from her face when she beheld who had accompanied Vullen.

“Dr. Talanis Deece,” Vullen said, ‘We have two most important visitors who need some information,’ he said. “I am hoping that you might be able to provide them with it.”

Deece’s eyebrows shot up in surprise as she looked at the administrator, and then back at the Dark Lord. “Oh?” she asked warily. “What sort of information?”

“Information about a woman who gave birth to twins here twenty years ago,” Vader said. “A woman by the name of Padmé Amidala Skywalker.”

Deece was better at hiding her thoughts from Vader, but only marginally so. She remembered Padmé Skywalker, she remembered the emotional wreck she had been.

“What about her?” Deece asked.

“You remember her?” Obi-Wan asked hopefully.

Deece nodded. “Yes,” she replied. “I do,” she said, looking warily from one man to the other.

“You will tell us everything you know,” Vader demanded, ever the commander.

“If you don’t mind,” Obi-Wan added, earning a sharp look from Vader.

“I’m not sure I ought to,” Deece replied, folding her arms over her ample bosom. “What are you to her that I should tell you anything?”

“Padmé was my wife,” Vader replied. “Is that sufficient reason?”

“Your wife?” Deece asked in astonishment. “What do you take me for, some sort of fool? How could she possibly be your wife?”

Vader became enraged and took an intimidating step toward the doctor. “You dare to doubt me?” he asked threateningly. “She was my wife, my soul mate, my very soul!” he declared hotly. “Do not for an instant...”

“Anakin, please,” Obi-Wan stepped in. “This isn’t going to help.”

“Anakin?” Deece asked, looking at Obi-Wan. “Why did you call him that?”

“Because that is his real name,” Obi-Wan said, looking at Vader. ‘Even if he doesn’t want to acknowledge it.’ He turned back to the doctor. “Why do you ask? Have you heard that name before?”

Deece looked at Vader, an expression of shock and incredulity on her face. She nodded. “Yes,” she said. “That is the name of the person that Padmé Skywalker kept calling for. None of us knew who it was, but I suppose it makes sense now. She was calling for her husband.”

For the past twenty years, Vader had believed that his heart was incapable of suffering any more torment. Until this very moment.

“She.... was calling for me?” he asked.

Deece looked at him, the change in his tone and demeanor remarkable. “Yes,” she said. “She was.”

Vader closed his eyes, willing himself to master his emotions. “Tell us what you know,” he asked her. “I implore you.”

Vullen left his two mysterious visitors with the good doctor, making a mental note to quiz Deece later about her meeting with them.

Deece lead the two men into a small office within the maternity ward. All three sat down, Deece behind a small desk. She was still in a state of shock over learning that Darth Vader was once the man whom Padmé Amidala had loved so desperately. *How is it possible he could be the same man?* She wondered, staring at the black menace before her. *How is it possible that he is capable of anything but murder and cruelty? What happened to him to change him so drastically?*

“Padmé was brought here in a mildly concussive state,” Deece began. “We examined her, and, for reasons we could not determine, she seemed to be slipping away. None of us could explain it, but we knew that if we didn’t act fast the babies she was carrying would not survive. We induced labor immediately. She had a very difficult time, she labored for hours before she was ready to deliver, and was so weak by then that the trauma of giving birth only drove her physical state even lower. Shortly after the twins were born, she started to hemorrhage. We fought to control it, but the tremendous loss of blood caused her to go into hypovolemic shock. The accompanying fever caused her to become delirious, and that is when we first heard the name Anakin,” she explained, looking at Vader.

“And this... delirium resulted in a coma?” Vader asked, trying desperately to master his crushing grief and the guilt that accompanied it.

Deece nodded. "That, coupled with the loss of blood," she replied. "We didn't expect her to survive that is why we agreed to allow her friends to take the twins."

"But she did survive," Vader pressed. "She did, didn't she?"

"She remained in a coma for nearly two weeks," Deece continued. "Her vital signs dangerously low the entire time. And then one day she woke up. She stabilized, but she was not the same."

"What do you mean?" Vader demanded.

"I mean that...she had no idea where she was, who she was, what had happened to her," Deece replied. "She had no memory of her life prior to awakening here."

"You mean she suffered brain damage?" Obi-Wan asked with a frown.

"No, not in the way you mean," Dr. Deece replied. "We ran extensive brain scans to determine if she had suffered any brain damage, but they were negative."

Vader felt a surge of relief at hearing this. "So what would explain her memory loss?" he asked, the thought of his beloved angel so changed and lost wrenching at his heart.

"The trauma of what she went through, both physical and emotional," Deece replied. "Sometimes the human mind will block out events that are too painful to deal with, resulting in what we refer to as dissociative amnesia."

"Is it possible to reverse this?" Vader asked hopefully, desperate to find a glimmer of hope in all this tragedy. "If there was no synaptic damage, then surely it must be possible for her to regain her lost memory."

Deece nodded. "Yes, it's possible," she said.

"Have you any idea where Padmé went when she left here?" Obi-Wan asked. "Any idea at all?"

Deece sighed, shaking her head. "No, I'm afraid not," she replied.

Vader was silent as he considered this dire news. *Where could she possibly be? How am I ever to find her?*

"How did she get off the outpost?" Vader asked. "In the state she was in? Why did you let her leave?" he demanded.

Deece looked at Vader, biting back the response that immediately jumped to her mind. "She was physically stable when she left," she replied. "We could not prevent her from leaving, Lord Vader."

"She had her ship here," Obi-Wan remembered. "She could have gone anywhere."

"Then I will search the galaxy until I find her," Vader averred. "She is out there; I will not stop until I find her."

"You are forgetting something, Anakin," Obi-Wan said. 'You are a wanted man now,' he reminded him. "Every bounty hunter in the galaxy will be looking for you. It's not like you can disguise yourself."

“Yes, I am well aware of that,” Vader retorted in frustration.

“Perhaps we are in the right place to find a solution to that problem,” Kenobi remarked.

“What do you mean?” Vader asked.

“Dr. Deece,” Obi-Wan asked. “This facility has a surgical wing, does it not?”

“Yes, yes it does,” Deece replied. “Why do you ask?”

“We require their services,” Obi-Wan replied, looking at Vader.

Massassi Outpost— Yavin IV

The Rebel Alliance had not evaded the Empire for close to two decades by being careless. Having won a significant victory against the Empire by destroying the Death Star, they knew that it was only a matter of time before the Empire sent an armada to wipe out their base on Yavin IV. Thus, it was time to relocate again.

The members of the Alliance were used to being mobile, accustomed to the enormous amount of work that went into packing up and moving sometimes half way across the galaxy.

Scouts had been sent out mere days after the destruction of the Death Star. Their job was a challenging one: find a new location for the Rebel base. The Empire’s territory was enormous, consisting of over one million member worlds and fifty million colonies, protectorates, and governorships throughout the Galaxy, stretching from the borders of the Deep Core to Wild Space. To evade the Empire’s notice was not an easy task, and everyone in the Alliance knew that any new hiding place they managed to find was only temporary. Such was the nature of rebellion, and all the members of this rebellion had come to accept this nomadic life as normal, and the price they must pay in order to fight the tyrannical Empire.

For Luke, however, this was a totally new experience. Having lived his entire life in the same place, Luke was accustomed to living a very unexciting and often monotonous existence. The excitement of his new life was still very new to him, and he savored every part of it. How much his life had changed in only a matter of weeks! It hardly seemed possible that so much could befall one person in so short a time. Not only had he left Tatooine, for what he hoped forever; but he had also been reunited with the twin sister he never knew he had, and met the father he had believed to be long dead. He knew that having Leia made accepting that their father had become Darth Vader far easier than it would have been had he been forced to carry the burden of his father’s fall alone. Leia saw the good man within the Dark Lord, and that was enough to convince Luke that Anakin Skywalker was still alive, even though he was buried under two decades of anger and pain. *Somehow we will release him from that anger*, Leia had vowed to her brother. *Somehow we will bring him back to the Light*.

As for Leia, she was accustomed to a life of privilege in the royal household of Alderaan. Although she had been involved with the Rebel Alliance for more than a year now, her involvement had always been from a distance, using her position as a senator and a princess to affect changes that no ordinary citizen could manage. But now, now that she had found her long lost twin brother, she felt that her place was with him and the Rebel Alliance. She had nearly twenty years of catching up to do with Luke, with whom she had already formed a deep bond.

If Leia were completely honest with herself, however, she would have to admit that there was another reason for her decision to stay with the Alliance, and that reason had hazel eyes, a cheeky grin and a cocky attitude. Leia had been courted by many suitors during her teenage years as a princess on Alderaan; powerful men, wealthy men, men looking for political ties with the House of Alderaan; but none of them had held the slightest interest for her. *So why does a smuggler with a smart mouth, who drives me crazy most of the time hold such a fascination for me?* She asked herself again and again.

“Any news from the scouts?” Luke asked as he joined his sister in the mess hall.

Leia shook her head. “No,” she said. “It’s still early, though. The Empire has a lot of cleaning up to do.”

Luke nodded as he sat down beside Han. “I wonder how the emperor is dealing with Father’s defection,” he commented.

“I’m sure he has put a huge bounty on his head,” Leia replied.

“You can count on it,” Han put in. “And it ain’t gonna be exactly easy for Vader to hide,” he added.

“Yes, I think he realizes that,” Leia replied. “Obi-Wan seems to think that they can do something to help him on Polis Massa.”

“Help him how?” Luke asked.

“Help him to live without the mask,” Leia replied.

“Wait a minute,” Han said, “I always thought that he wore that get up just to scare the crap out of people. You mean it’s actually functional?”

Leia nodded. “Yes, apparently he had some sort of massive accident many years ago, and cannot live without it,” she said. “Obi-Wan didn’t go into a lot of details.”

“You mean they are going to perform surgery on him to repair the injuries that forced him into having to wear all that?” Luke asked.

“Hopefully, yes,” Leia replied. “I really hope they can help him,” she added.

Han kept his comments to himself, for once, realizing that, for reasons beyond his comprehension, both of his two friends had accepted the Dark Lord as their father. Obviously they saw something in him that he wasn’t capable of seeing, or perhaps unwilling to see.

“I wonder if he’s found out anything about our mother,” Luke remarked.

Leia was wondering the same thing. “I have an idea,” she said. “Let’s go to Polis Massa ourselves and see what’s going on. I can’t stand this waiting not knowing what is happening.”

“You mean just take off?” Luke said. “How can we do that?”

“It will be weeks before they have found another suitable planet,” Leia said. “The fleet will be leaving Yavin IV in a few days’ time. We could take a trip there before we relocate. Aren’t you curious to know what’s going on, Luke? Can you imagine if they are able to help him? We could see our father’s face for the first time!”

“That would be amazing,” Luke agreed, trying not to get his hopes up. “But how do you suppose we go there? Can you fly an x-wing?”

Leia turned and looked at Han, a smile on her face.

“Oh no,” he said. “You’re not getting me involved in this insanity.”

“Come on, Han,” Luke cajoled. “Where’s your sense of adventure?”

“I’ve got plenty of that,” Han retorted. “Insanity is something else altogether.”

“Fine,” Leia said, sighing. “If you won’t take us, we’ll simply have to find someone who will.”

Han could tell when he was being played; having won his beloved Millennium Falcon in a sabaac game, he was well versed in the signs. But there was just something about the high spirited princess that he couldn’t say no to, and that *really* bothered him.

“Alright, alright,” he said at last. ‘I know when I’ve been outnumbered. Besides, Polis Massa is on the other side of the galaxy from Jabba the Hutt,’ he reasoned. “And the further away I can get from that pile of filth, the better.”

Leia smiled. “Wonderful,” she said. “The fleet will be assembling in three days’ time. Is that too soon to leave?”

“I’ll have her ready to go,” Han said. “No worries. Even if I do think you’re both nuts.”

Luke and Leia merely looked at one another and smiled.

Chapter 15

Chapter 15

Polis Massa Outpost-Medical Facility

Darth Vader had become accustomed to pain, for it had been his constant companion since Mustafar. So the possibility that the injuries he had suffered and endured half his life could be repaired astonished him. More than that, it served to augment the growing animosity he felt towards the emperor.

Palpatine had overseen Vader's transformation on that day, had ensured that the mutilated wreckage that had been left to die on Mustafar was transformed into a fearsome cyborg, more machine than man. Vader had taken his master at his word when he had told him that his injuries were beyond repair. Now it appeared that this too was a lie.

The chief surgeon at the Polis Massa medical facility had conducted an extensive examination of Vader as well as a battery of tests. Vader was exhausted when it was all over, but was anxious to learn what conclusions the physician had come to. Was it possible to repair the massive injuries he had lived with for half his life? He was reluctant to get his hopes up, reluctant to think of the possibility that the medical technology required to repair these injuries had existed for many years, and had been denied him by his master. The thought that he had endured a painful, semi-human existence for twenty years unnecessarily was horrifying to him. He almost didn't want to know, for he knew that this knowledge would be almost too much to bear. The description of the way Padmé had suffered both physically and emotionally had devastated him, and he wasn't sure how much more he could take at this point.

"Anakin, pacing about will not make the time pass any faster," Obi-Wan remarked as he watched the Dark Lord pacing within the small waiting room. "They will come and speak to us as soon as possible, I'm sure."

Vader turned and looked at Obi-Wan, stopping for a moment. "I am not holding out any hope that they will have good news," he admitted. "It's been twenty years, it's too late now."

"Perhaps not," Obi-Wan said. 'Surely you realize that anything Palpatine told you was a lie,' he added. "And that if he told you your injuries were beyond repair, that he had a reason for doing so, whether it was true or not."

Vader made no reply, for Obi-Wan was not telling him anything he hadn't already considered. "No doubt," he said at last. "He does nothing without a reason, usually a purely selfish and self-serving one."

"Of course," Obi-Wan replied. "That is the way of the Dark Side."

Vader glared at the old Jedi. "It was not the Dark Side that left me mutilated and burning on the shores of a river of fire, Kenobi," he retorted coldly.

Obi-Wan nodded, acknowledging his part in Vader's horrific fate. "Perhaps not directly," he replied. "But indirectly, it was. The Dark Side drove you to go to Mustafar, to slaughter the Separatists, and to attack your wife."

"I do not need you to remind me of what I did," Vader replied, turning away from him. "I have spent a lifetime living with the consequences of the decisions I made."

Obi-Wan was surprised by Vader's words. "You sound as though you have regrets, Anakin."

"Stop calling me that," Vader snapped. "I am *not* Anakin Skywalker; I have not been Anakin Skywalker for twenty years. He no longer exists."

Obi-Wan smiled. "Yes, so you keep telling me," he quipped. "So why aren't I convinced?"

"Because you are a delusional old fool," Vader growled in response. "That is why."

Obi-Wan simply continued to smile. "You may not be willing to admit it, or even fully realize it yet, but Anakin Skywalker has begun to awaken within you," he told Vader, not caring if he angered him. 'The moment you decided to save your child heralded his reawakening; the fact that you love your children proves irrevocably that he exists deep within you.' He paused, waiting for Vader's denial. When it did not come, he continued. "Can you honestly tell me that your reasons for wanting to help Luke and Leia escape the Death Star were rooted in Darkness? That the reason you desperately want to find Padmé is because of the Dark Side? No, the reasons for both are rooted in love, and the Dark Side is the antithesis of love."

"Spare me your philosophical lectures, Obi-Wan," Vader replied tiredly. "I've heard enough. Is it possible for you just to be silent? Even for a few moments?"

Obi-Wan was about to respond, when the physician who had examined Vader earlier entered the room.

"Lord Vader, please sit down," the chief surgeon, Juris Drii, said as he reentered the small waiting area.

Reluctantly Vader sat down, his impatience threatening to make him lose his temper at any moment. "What is your prognosis?" he asked, his great gloved hands forming fists on the table top. "Is there anything you can do?"

Drii nodded. "Yes," he said. "There is."

Rebel Base-Yavin IV

Leia watched the woman as she walked slowly through the rose garden. She stopped every so often to smell one of the fragrant blossoms, but they brought her no joy. Her face, though certainly beautiful, was devoid of any trace of joy, any hint of happiness. It seemed as though she were moving around in a trance, her movements slow and deliberate. Leia stared hard at the woman's face, somehow feeling as though she knew her from somewhere. There was something about her eyes that struck Leia as being familiar, and she felt almost as though she were watching herself at a later stage of her life. But who was she? And what burden did she carry to make her so melancholy? The woman started down the path that led away from the garden, and Leia felt compelled to follow her. She walked quickly to catch up to her, afraid to

startle her. Leia followed at a distance as the woman lead her out of the garden and into a courtyard, surrounded by a high stone wall. Trees reached their limbs over the wall, casting patterns of dappled light upon the cobblestone under foot. In the distance, Leia was certain that she heard the sound of water rushing, as though a great water fall were close by. It distracted her for a moment, and when she turned back to where the woman had been mere seconds before, she saw nothing but the empty courtyard. The woman had vanished.

Leia woke up with a start, the startling images from her dream shattering her sleep. She sat up in her bed, the emotions that her vision had stirred up within her confusing her. Was this a vision? Or merely a dream? Luke had told her about the Force, how it ran in their family. She decided that he was the only one who could give her the answers she needed. She got out of bed, and, after wrapping a robe around herself, left her small room to find her brother.

Knocking lightly on the door, so as to not awaken anyone else, Leia waited for her brother to appear. He did so almost immediately, almost as though he knew she was coming.

“What is it?” he asked, squinting in the harsh light of the corridor. “What’s wrong?”

“I had a dream,” Leia told him as she entered his small cabin. “A dream about a woman in a garden.”

Luke was silent, his sister’s words shocking him. “Was there a courtyard in the dream? And a waterfall?”

Leia turned around and looked at him, startled. “Yes!” she said. “Don’t tell me...you dreamed of her too?”

Luke nodded. “Yes,” he said. “She was sad, very sad, and very beautiful.”

“Yes, yes that’s it exactly!” Leia exclaimed. “What does it mean, Luke? And why did we have the very same dream?”

“It was a vision, Leia,” he said, wishing he’d learned more under his short apprenticeship with Obi-Wan. “I think the Force can give us the ability to see things that have yet to happen.”

Leia nodded. “I thought that might have been it,” she said. “But knowing that you had the same dream, I know that must be it.”

“I think so too,” Luke concurred. “Do you know who she is?”

“I don’t know for sure,” Leia replied. “But I think she’s our mother.”

“Yes, that must be who she is,” Luke replied. “Or else why would we both dream of her?”

Leia nodded. “Perhaps this will help Father find her, Luke,” she said. “Perhaps he will know the place we both saw.”

“Maybe he had the same dream,” Luke said. “Who knows?”

“Maybe so,” Leia replied. She rubbed her eyes tiredly. ‘I’m sorry I woke you up,’ she said, suddenly realizing how late it was. “I just had to talk to you about this.”

“You didn’t wake me,” Luke replied. “I woke up right after the dream ended, right when she...”

“Disappeared?” Leia finished with a smile.

Luke smiled back. “Yeah, that’s right.”

“Wow,” Leia said quietly, amazed by the strong psychic link she shared with her brother. ‘We’d better try to get back to sleep,’ she said. “More packing tomorrow.”

“Great,” Luke said with a yawn. “Sounds like a lot of fun.”

Leia smiled, and kissed her brother on the cheek. “Night Luke.”

“Night Leia. Sleep well.”

Polis Massa Outpost-Medical Facility

Vader sat perfectly still as he listened to Dr. Drii describe the three step process that he proposed to repair Vader’s massive injuries. He was afraid that at some point he would awaken and find himself back on the Death Star, that the incredible events of the past several days had only been a dream.

According to Dr. Drii, the restoration of Vader’s body would be a massive undertaking, not without considerable risk. Risks did not concern Vader, however; he had no choice but to undergo the surgery. He had no choice but to alter his appearance so radically that the bounty hunters he knew were combing the galaxy for him at that very moment would not have a chance of recognizing him. The only thing that concerned him at this point was the fact that the surgeon wished to conduct the operation in three stages, with a recovery time of several days between each stage. He was anxious to get started on his search for Padmé, and the thought of having to wait for what may end up being weeks was very frustrating.

“Is it possible to combine all three stages into one?” Vader asked.

Dr. Drii looked at Vader. “It would certainly not be my first choice,” he admitted. “Each procedure is quite invasive and carries with it a certain amount of risk. To do all three at once would be increasing that risk tremendously.”

“I am willing to do so,” Vader replied. “Can you do it?”

Dr. Drii glanced at Obi-Wan, and then looked back at Vader. “Yes, we can. Of course you realize that you will be required to convalesce for a significant period before...”

“I am not concerned about that right now,” Vader replied, reflecting that he had no intention of spending any more time than absolutely necessary at the outpost. “How soon can you commence?”

“We can have you prepped and ready for surgery within two hours,” Dr. Drii replied. “If you are certain that you wish to proceed.”

Vader nodded. “I wish it,” he replied. “Make it so.”

Chapter 16

CHAPTER 16

Having harvested DNA samples from Vader during his initial examination, Dr. Drii and his team of medidroids used it to, in a manner of speaking, reprogram his existing cells to regenerate the adjacent damaged ones. It was a laborious, time consuming task, but one that the surgical unit of the Polis Massa medical facility had developed and perfected.

Dr. Drii was not entirely comfortable performing the entire procedure at once, but it was not easy to say no to Darth Vader. Normally such an operation would have been done in three stages: limbs, skin and hair, and then the most difficult and dangerous part, the thoracic damage. Doing all three in succession placed a great deal of stress upon the patient, and tested the limits of his physical stamina.

If there was one thing that Drii had discovered about Vader, however, it was that he was a highly unusual individual. Having seen the injuries that had forced Vader to depend upon a breath suit and mask for twenty years, it was incredible to the physician that he had survived at all. There seemed to be something extraordinary about Darth Vader, something that went beyond the mysterious powers that he was renowned for. It was because of this uniqueness and singular strength that Drii had agreed to combine the three stages into one, for he felt if anyone was capable of withstanding such a risky, invasive procedure, it was Vader.

Obi-Wan had a great deal of time to meditate while Vader was undergoing his surgery. The past several days had produced such an astonishing series of events that he'd scarcely had time to reflect on what it all meant.

The past twenty years had been difficult ones for Obi-Wan Kenobi. Anakin Skywalker had been his best friend, his brother; and having witnessed his destruction had been tremendously painful for Kenobi. There had been many nights over the past two decades where the yellow, pain filled eyes of his former friend haunted his dreams, the sounds of his screams of agony echoing in his mind. Kenobi had questioned himself again and again about what had befallen Anakin, wondering if there had been something he could have done to prevent it. *But he kept everything to himself*, Kenobi reflected, *his marriage, Padmé's pregnancy, his nightmares... if only I'd known, if only he'd confided in me, then perhaps I could have prevented all this from happening.*

Part of Kenobi felt guilty for what had happened, a large part. It was largely this guilt that was compelling him to help Vader now. Somehow knowing that he'd had a small part in helping him find a way to repair his grievous injuries made the sting of his guilt lessen somewhat. And if he could help him return to the light... that would be the answer to twenty years worth of prayers.

Twelve hours passed, and still no word from the surgical team. Obi-Wan had managed to get a few hours of sleep during the long wait, but it was a restless sleep. His mind was far too occupied to sleep well. The surgery, of course, was foremost on his mind. But there were other pressing issues that were concerning him as well. *Perhaps I should have remained with*

Luke and Leia to train them... they will need training now if the emperor senses their existence... Kenobi had no doubts that it was only a matter of time before Palpatine learned the name of the young rebel who had destroyed his beloved Death Star. And when he did, he would know of the existence of Anakin Skywalker's son. And now that Darth Vader was no longer his apprentice, Palpatine would no doubt be looking for another to replace him; who better than the son of Skywalker? *I cannot let that happen; I lost Anakin to that fiend, I will not lose Luke. And what of Leia? Was the emperor aware of her existence? Were Vader's actions on the Death Star enough to tip Palpatine off?* Kenobi realized that the threat was double if the emperor were aware of Leia's relationship to Vader. *She must be trained as well,* Kenobi realized. As the daughter of Anakin Skywalker, her abilities were bound to be just as strong as Luke's, and she would need training to learn how to use those abilities.

And then there was Padmé... It had taken Obi-Wan a long time to get over the shock of Anakin and Padmé's secret marriage. He had felt so betrayed that Anakin would keep such an enormous secret from him. Kenobi had always been aware of the boyhood crush that Anakin had on Padmé; but he had no idea that it was so serious, and reciprocated by the beautiful senator. Her love for him was unquestionable; even after Vader had attacked her on Mustafar, she still believed in him, still loved him. That astonished Obi-Wan. *But now she has no memory of that life, no memory of him. How will she react if we find her? Will the sight of the man she once knew and loved be enough to restore her memory? Or will it only add to the emotional trauma she has suffered?*

Kenobi stood up and paced around in the small waiting area, absent-mindedly stroking his white beard as he pondered all this. *Master Yoda would be the perfect master for the Skywalker twins,* he decided. *He is just strict enough to make up for the lateness of their initiation. But how will Anakin feel about him training his children after the way he mislead Padmé?* Given the distinct possibility that Palpatine would learn of the existence of the twins, Anakin would have no choice but to accept Yoda's help.

"General Kenobi?"

Obi-Wan looked over to see Dr. Drii standing in the doorway of the waiting area. He walked over to him at once.

"Well?" he asked simply.

"We've completed the procedure," Drii told him. "Lord Vader is alive."

Kenobi nodded. "Now what?" he asked.

"He will need to spend a few hours in bacta now," Drii responded. "To help speed up the healing process. After that we will keep him sedated to allow his body to heal, and the regenerative process to be completed."

"And how long will this take?" Kenobi asked.

"That depends on him," Drii replied. "On his recuperative abilities. Normally I would estimate a week, but with him, who knows."

"I see," Kenobi replied.

"I am quite frankly astonished that he was left in that condition," Drii remarked. "And for twenty years, no less."

“Are you saying that his injuries could have been repaired sooner?” Obi-Wan asked.

“Yes indeed,” Drii replied. “I don’t understand why they weren’t.”

“The emperor is nothing if not a sadist,” Kenobi said bitterly. “No doubt he thought Vader was a far more effective henchman as a cyborg than he would have been as a man.”

Drii nodded. “Perhaps so,” he replied. “In either case, he is fully human again.”

“You have my thanks, Doctor,” Kenobi replied.

Rebel Base-Yavin IV

Being accustomed to a nomadic existence, the Rebel Alliance was very adept at packing their equipment quickly and efficiently. This was, after all, not the first time the threat of an Imperial invasion had forced them to relocate.

For Luke, Leia and Han, however, this was all new. Luke had lived in the same place his entire life, so the idea of moving was strange to him. As for Leia, she too had lived in the same place; but had she felt compelled to move, there was an army of servants to do the grunt work.

Han Solo was by nature a drifter; belonging to an organization like the Alliance was a new experience for him. It felt strange to the cynical young man to feel a part of something bigger than himself, something not connected to making money. But he liked it, he liked the feeling it gave him. Most of all, he liked being around Leia.

Han Solo was no stranger to women; he’d had women in his life, all of whom he’d only wanted for one reason, all of whom were more than willing to give it to him. But Leia was different, he decided. She was pure, she was noble, she was brave and classy; nothing like the women he was used to. *So why can’t I get her out of my mind?* he asked himself again and again. He’d tried reminding himself of the qualities that drove him crazy about her; she was bossy, she was self-righteous, she was stubborn...*but so damn cute with those braids of hers piled up on her head, and those big brown eyes...*

“May I join you?”

Han looked up to see none other than Leia standing before him, a tray of lunch in her hands.

“Sure,” he said, trying to play it cool.

“Thanks,” she said, sitting down gracefully.

Han glanced at her lunch; not a thing that wasn’t healthy on her plate, of course.

“Where’s Chewie?” Leia asked.

“Just checking a few things on the Falcon,” Han replied.

A slight frown creased Leia’s brow. “There’s nothing wrong is there?” she asked. “You said we could leave for Polis Massa first thing in the morning.”

“Yeah, I did,” he replied. “And I meant it. He’s just doing a last minute check. Don’t get your braids in a knot, princess.”

Leia couldn't help but smile at his comment. "Okay," she said, relaxing. "I appreciate you doing this for us," she added.

Han shrugged. "No problem," he said. "Besides, if it gets me outta having to do more packing, I'm happy to do it."

Leia looked at him, confused by the mixed messages she was getting from him. Sometimes he was utterly charming, completely irresistible; and other times he was as grumpy as an angry gundark.

"Well thankfully the packing is done," Leia replied. "So if that's the only reason you're doing this, then perhaps you'd like to reconsider."

"Geez, your highnessness, can't you take a joke?" Han replied, rolling his eyes. "You're so damn serious all the time. Lighten up!"

Leia felt foolish for her remark. "I'm sorry," she said, looking down at her plate. "I'm just anxious to find out what's going on with my father."

"So I guessed," Han replied. "I'm gonna go make sure Chewie's not taking apart anything. He likes doing that," he added with a smirk. "I'll see you first thing in the morning, Princess."

Leia nodded as she watched him stand up and take his leave of her, more confused than ever by the way she felt whenever Han Solo was close by.

Polis Massa Outpost— Medical facility

*Vader watched the woman as she walked slowly through the rose garden. She stopped every so often to smell one of the fragrant blossoms, but they brought her no joy. Her face, though certainly beautiful, was devoid of any trace of joy, any hint of happiness. It seemed as though she were moving around in a trance, her movements slow and deliberate. Vader stared at the woman's face, the shock of seeing her again after so long rendering him temporarily unable to move. He tried to call to her, but no voice would come. Suddenly the woman started down the path that led away from the garden, and Vader felt compelled to follow her. Finally able to move his legs, he walked quickly to catch up to her, afraid of startling her in his haste. He followed at a distance as the woman lead him out of the garden and into a courtyard, surrounded by a high stone wall. Trees reached their limbs over the wall, casting patterns of dappled light upon the cobblestone under foot. In the distance, Vader was certain that he heard the sound of water rushing, as though a great water fall were close by. It distracted him for a moment, and when he turned back to where the woman had been mere seconds before, he saw nothing but the empty courtyard. The woman had vanished. It was then that he found his voice, and uttered a single word: **Padmé!***

Chapter 17

Chapter 17

Rebel Base— Yavin IV

Luke woke early on the morning that the Rebel Alliance was due to leave Yavin IV forever. While Luke felt a certain kinship with the people of the Alliance, his heart was elsewhere this morning.

The prospect of possibly seeing his father as he truly was at once time, of seeing the face of Anakin Skywalker, both excited and unnerved Luke. It was only a few days ago that he had learned that he even had a father, that his father had not been murdered as Obi-Wan Kenobi had told him. Finding out that Darth Vader was that father was shocking, even horrifying; but learning that he had a twin sister had made that shock a little easier to bear. Hearing about his father's fall, the tragic circumstances that had driven him to the Dark Side, had given Luke an entirely new perspective on the man he now thought of as his father.

Darth Vader, or Anakin Skywalker, was a complex man, a multi-faceted man; Luke was starting to see this. There was good in him, Luke himself had felt it. He had felt his father's brilliant, reassuring presence as he flew through the Death Star trench. *That* was Anakin Skywalker; that was the man Luke desperately wanted to know. *Perhaps now I'll get my chance*, he thought as he climbed out of his cot. *Perhaps today I will meet my father face to face.*

Luke had just finished getting dressed when he heard a knock at his cabin door. *It's Leia*, he thought with a smile as he moved to let her in.

"Morning Leia," he said. "All set?"

Leia nodded. "I'm kind of nervous, to tell you the truth," she said as Luke joined her in the corridor.

"The Falcon isn't that bad, Leia," Luke teased.

Leia laughed. "You know what I mean," she said.

"Why are you nervous?" Luke asked. "You've already accepted our father, haven't you?"

"Yes, I have," Leia replied. "It's not that... I suppose I'm just afraid that they weren't able to help him, and that he will be forced to live with that mask for the rest of his life."

"I hadn't thought of that," Luke replied quietly. "Do you know what happened to him? Why he was forced to depend on artificial means to live?"

"No, I don't," she asked. "I was reluctant to ask," she admitted.

"Yeah, I can understand that," Luke replied as they walked towards the hangar bay together. 'Maybe Obi-Wan can tell us,' he said. "He and Father were good friends at one time."

“Yes, maybe so,” Leia said. She took a deep breath as they entered the hangar bay. “I just hope Han has this bucket of bolts ready to go,” she muttered.

“I heard that,” Han said, poking his head in the hangar. “I told you she’d be ready, and she is. So, if you’ll just get on board, we’ll get this insanity underway.”

Luke and Leia exchanged a smile and then proceeded to the Falcon, their hopes high.

Polis Massa Outpost— Medical Facility

Obi-Wan still could not believe his eyes. The physician had given him a full report on Vader’s recovery, but until he saw him with his own eyes, he had difficulty believing that he truly was as he once was. But now as he stood in the recovery room, he did see him with his own eyes. And it was an astonishing sight.

Where once his hair had been long and wavy, it was now very short, not much more than stubble; but it was his face that Obi-Wan was amazed by. It was as it had been; aged somewhat of course, but the ruggedly handsome features were the same.

Obi-Wan wasn’t prepared for the rush of emotion he felt seeing the face of his one time best friend. Looking at him reminded him of all the good times they shared, the many times that they had fought side by side, the laughs they had shared, as well as the tears.

You were my brother! I loved you!

I hate you!

Obi-Wan shut his eyes as the memories of that horrible moment from Mustafar flashed through his mind. He pushed the painful memories away and looked up at the medidroid who was taking Vader’s vitals.

“How much longer will he be unconscious?” he asked.

“Not long,” the droid replied. “We will be reviving him soon.”

Kenobi nodded his understanding. “And will he be able to leave soon after that?”

“You will need to ask Dr. Drii that, Sir,” the droid replied. “That will be his decision.”

“I see,” Obi-Wan replied. He knew how anxious Vader was to start his search for Padmé; he would not take kindly to being delayed, even if it was for his own good. *He’s never been a patient man*, he reflected. *Even as a young boy he always wanted to do things right away, never had the patience to wait for anything...*

“General Kenobi?”

Obi-Wan turned around to see the administrator of the medical facility standing in the doorway.

“Yes?” he asked.

“There are some people here who claim to be Lord Vader’s children,” he replied. “I was hoping you could verify their identity.”

Obi-Wan frowned. “His children? What the devil are they doing here?” he muttered. “Where are they?”

"This way," Vullen replied, turning and walking into the corridor.

Obi-Wan walked with the administrator through the winding corridors back through the blast doors into the administrative wing. As they approached Vullen's office, he was surprised to see Luke and Leia, along with Han Solo and his copilot, Chewbacca.

"Obi-Wan!" Leia said when she spotted the old Jedi. "What is going on? Where is our father?"

"It's alright, Administrator," Obi-Wan reassured Vullen. "I can vouch for them. They are indeed Anakin's children."

"Very well then," Vullen said, looking askance at Chewbacca. "I suppose it would be alright to allow them in, then. But only the children of the patient are permitted to see him. That is our policy."

"We understand," Leia said. She looked at Obi-Wan. "Tell us what's happening, Obi-Wan."

"I will, as soon as you tell me why you are here," he replied. "Aren't you supposed to be helping the Alliance relocate?"

"Both Luke and I felt that this was more important," Leia replied. "We needed to know what is going on with our father."

"And we have something we need to tell him," Luke put in as the small group made their way back down the corridor. "Something that we hope will help him to find our mother."

Obi-Wan lifted his eyebrows in surprise. "Indeed?" he said. "And what would that be?"

"A dream that Leia and I both had," Luke explained. "About a woman in a rose garden, a beautiful, sad woman. We dreamed the very same thing, Ben. Don't you think that's significant?"

Obi-Wan nodded thoughtfully. "Yes, I do," he replied. "You believe this woman is your mother?"

"Who else could she be?" Leia said. "Have you any leads as to her whereabouts? Do you know what became of her?"

"We have very little information, I'm afraid," he told them. "But now that your father's surgery has been successful, he will be able to start looking for her."

"You mean Father's injuries have been repaired?" Luke asked in amazement. "He no longer has to wear the mask?"

"That's exactly what I mean," Obi-Wan replied. "Would you like to see him?" he asked as he stopped outside of the recovery room where Vader was sleeping.

Luke and Leia looked at one another. "Yes," they replied, almost in unison.

Obi-Wan smiled. "Then go on in," he told them. "He's right in there. He's still asleep, but they tell me he'll be revived later on today."

Luke and Leia did not hesitate for a moment longer. Luke activated the door, and the two of them stepped inside.

Tentatively they approached the bed where their father lay asleep.

“Look at him, Luke,” Leia whispered in amazement. “He’s... he’s so young!”

Luke nodded, his eyes taking in every detail of his father’s face. *He looks like me... or I guess I look like him*, he reflected. “I can’t believe it,” Luke said. “He’s whole again... he’s fully human again.”

Leia reached out a hand and lightly touched her father’s face. *To think that this beautiful face was hidden by a mask for twenty years*, she thought.

“You look like him, Luke,” Leia said at last, looking up at her brother. “I’ll just bet his eyes are blue like yours.”

Luke smiled. “I think so too,” he said.

“You must be Lord Vader’s children,” Dr. Drii stated as he entered the room.

Luke and Leia turned around to face him. “Yes we are,” Leia replied. “Are you the person we need to thank for restoring our father’s health?”

Dr. Drii smiled. “Well, I was the chief surgeon, if that’s what you’re asking,” he replied. “Your father is an extraordinary man.”

“Yes, he is,” Leia replied, looking back down at his face. “How long will he need to remain unconscious?”

“I was just going to order the medidroid to revive him,” Drii replied. “Looks like you timed your visit well.”

“Yes it sure does,” Luke agreed.

He and Leia stepped out of Dr. Drii’s way as he moved over to beside Vader’s bedside. “Revive the patient,” he ordered the medidroid.

The droid administered a dose of medication into Vader’s shoulder. Luke and Leia watched with tremendous anticipation, waiting for their father to awaken.

As the drug entered his bloodstream, Vader felt as though he were awakening from a very deep, very long sleep. He was aware of the presence of others in the room, and struggled to regain consciousness. His eyelids felt as heavy as lead, though, as he fought against the lethargy to open them. His struggle was rewarded, however, for the first sight that met his eyes were the faces of his two children. They smiled at him, and he did his best to smile back.

“Hi,” Leia said, coming to her father’s side once again. “You look wonderful!”

Vader focused his eyes on her face, grateful that he was finally able to see it with his own eyes. “Thanks,” he said, his voice sounding strange to his ears after so long. He turned and looked at Luke next, amazed by how much his son resembled him.

“I had no idea you were so young,” Luke remarked. “Or how much I look like you,” he added with a smile.

Vader smiled. "What are you doing here?" he asked.

"We wanted to see how you were," Leia replied, taking her father's hand in hers. "The fleet is space borne now, so we decided to take a little detour here."

"I see," Vader replied.

"We also wanted to tell you about a dream we had," Luke put in. "We think it was a vision, telling us where Mother is."

Vader was startled by his son's words. "Tell me," he said.

Luke glanced at his sister before proceeding. "Well, we both had the dream," he began. "At the same time, no less."

Vader nodded. "A vision," he stated. "Go on."

"I, well, we both saw a woman in a rose garden," Leia began. "She looked very sad, and almost....lost. She was beautiful, with big brown eyes and dark hair. She wandered through this garden, and I followed her. Eventually she left, and went into a courtyard. It was surrounded by a high wall made of stone, with tall trees outside the wall."

As Vader listened to the description of his children's dream, he was struck with a tremendous sense of familiarity. "There was a waterfall nearby, wasn't there?" he asked.

Leia's eyes widened, and she merely nodded.

"*You* had this dream too?" Luke asked his father.

Vader turned his eyes to Luke and nodded. "Yes," he said. "It *was* your mother in that garden. And since we all had the same vision, there must be some truth to it."

"That's what we thought," Luke said. "Do you recognize the place?"

"Not the garden," Vader replied. "But the waterfall made me think it was Naboo. That would make sense; it's your mother's home planet."

"Do you think she's there?" he asked.

Vader rubbed his eyes, the lethargy still too great to fight for long. "I don't know, Luke," he replied. "But it's possible."

"We should let you rest," Leia said, realizing how weak her father was still. "We can talk more about this later."

Vader did not object, for he was finding it difficult to keep his eyes open by this point. "Very well," he said through a yawn.

Leia smiled, and then bent and kissed her father on the cheek. "Rest," she said to him.

Vader simply nodded, and then allowed sleep to take him once again.

"Come on," Luke said. "Let's go find Ben. I have a lot of questions for him."

Chapter 18

Chapter 18

Polis Massa Outpost — Medical Facility

Luke and Leia found Obi-Wan with Han and Chewbacca waiting in the corridor. Han looked decidedly bored, and Chewbacca was grumbling about being hungry.

“Well?” Han asked. “What’s goin’ on?”

Leia and Luke looked at one another, shaking their heads in amazement.

“It’s just incredible,” Leia replied at last with a smile. “He is completely healed; you’d never know he was ever injured.”

“How come he had to wear that get up anyway?” Han asked.

“I was actually hoping Ben here might be able to fill us in on that,” Luke replied, looking at Obi-Wan.

Obi-Wan had realized that it was only a matter of time before the question was asked.

“We were just on our way to the refectory,” Obi-Wan told the twins, avoiding the question for the moment. “Care to join us?”

“Sure,” Luke replied. “I’m starving.”

“So the surgery was a success,” Han said.

Leia nodded. “Yes, it’s like he’s a different man.”

“Is he?” Han challenged. “Just because he doesn’t look like Vader doesn’t mean he isn’t Vader.”

“He still has far to go,” Obi-Wan spoke up. “But he is definitely showing signs of abandoning the Dark Side.”

“I agree,” Leia said. “He’s not the same person he was. And it isn’t just the physical changes; he’s changing on the inside too.”

“Ben, what happened to him?” Luke asked.

“I told you all about his fall to the Dark Side, Luke,” Obi-Wan replied, sipping a cup of tea.

“Yes, we know all about that,” Luke replied. “I mean, physically. What happened to him that he was forced to depend on artificial means in order to survive?”

Obi-Wan felt his stomach tighten in anxiety at the thought of answering Luke's question. *How do I tell them the truth without making them hate me?*

"When your father chose to become Palpatine's apprentice," Kenobi began, "one of his first... assignments was to go to the planet Mustafar, a violent, volcanic planet in the Outer Rim. I went there to confront him," he continued, deliberately leaving out many of the most horrific details. "And we fought. It was a long, grueling fight. Your father was enraged, totally immersed in the Dark Side. He had spent the night killing, and his blood lust had driven him mad with rage. It was a terrible fight; your father was like a brother to me; but I had no choice but to defend myself, to try to destroy what he had become."

"What about our mother?" Leia asked. "Did she know what had happened to him?"

Obi-Wan hesitated before replying, realizing that he would have no choice but to tell Luke and Leia the whole, horrifying truth.

"When I found out about Anakin's atrocities, I went to your mother. I thought perhaps she would be able to tell me where she was. I did not know that they were married—no one did. I told her what had happened, how he had turned to the Dark Side, how he had helped Palpatine slaughter the Jedi; but she refused to believe it. She loved your father so deeply that she could not believe he would do anything so evil. After I left her, I knew that she would immediately go to find Anakin, and she did. I had hidden on board her ship, knowing that she would take me straight to him. When he saw me leaving her ship, your father believed that Padmé had betrayed him, that she had brought me there to kill him."

"You used Mother to get to Father?" Leia asked hotly. "You put her in that kind of danger knowing what he was like? What he had become?"

Obi-Wan was silent, having no answer for her question. Yes, he had used Padmé to find Anakin, with no thought to her safety.

"I suppose I did," Obi-Wan replied at last, his eyes cast down to the cup of tea sitting before him. "But I was desperate. You have to understand; your father had just murdered hundreds of younglings at the Jedi Temple! He was a tremendous danger to the galaxy, an enemy of the Republic!"

"And our mother was expendable?" Luke asked his blue eyes cold as ice.

"Of course she wasn't!" Obi-Wan replied. "I didn't mean to imply that she was! It was the only way to find Anakin, and if I had to find him, we had to do our best to stop the Sith from taking control of the galaxy."

"But you didn't stop them," Luke pointed out. "The emperor has been in power for my entire life, and our father was there at his side!"

"You still haven't told us what happened on Mustafar," Leia remarked. "What happened to him that resulted in injuries so terrible that he needed to wear that mask in order to live?"

"Well, as I was saying, your father and I fought," Obi-Wan continued. "He got cocky, as he was often prone to do, and made a jump over a river of lava to reach me on the other side. While he was airborne, I...I used my lightsaber and incapacitated him."

"Incapacitated how?" Luke asked.

“His legs, below the knees,” Obi-Wan replied, the memory of Anakin’s screams of pain still echoing in his mind, “his flesh arm below the elbow. He fell onto the shore, and within moment the heat from the lava...ignited his clothing. He was engulfed in flames within seconds.”

Luke and Leia were speechless, too horrified to react. Leia reached over and took her brother’s hand for support, and noticed that he was trembling as much as she was.

“And you left him there?” Luke asked, his tone accusatory. “Left him there to burn to death?”

“Yes,” Obi-Wan replied. “I didn’t have the heart to kill him. Perhaps that makes me a coward, but your father was like a brother to me, I couldn’t do it. Believe me, I have lived with the guilt of that day for the past twenty years; don’t for a moment think that it didn’t break my heart to see him become what he did. I loved Anakin like my own brother; it ripped my heart out to have to try to destroy him. But what choice did I have? He was a murderer; he even turned on your mother, and may have killed her had I not been there to stop him!”

“You’re lying!” Leia cried at this point. “He would never harm our mother! He loved her more than anything! He loved her so much he sacrificed his soul to save her!”

“Yes, that is true,” Obi-Wan replied calmly. “But when he believed that she had betrayed him, he snapped. He reached out with the Force and tried to choke her... I saw it with my own eyes! If I hadn’t stopped him, he may have killed her. I hate to have to tell you this, truly I do; but you don’t seem to understand the circumstances in which I found myself. Your father was a monster, a heartless killing machine. I was the only one left to try to stop him. And all I ended up doing was making things worse,” he concluded sadly.

Neither Luke nor Leia were able to reply at this point; the emotions that Obi-Wan’s story evoked within them prevented it. The tragic senselessness of it all was what hit them the hardest. Their father had sacrificed everything, *everything*; and what did it all come down to in the end? He had lost the very One he had sold his soul to protect.

“I... I can’t deal with this right now,” Luke stammered, standing up. ‘This is too much to handle.’ He looked at his sister, sensing that she felt the same way. He held out his hand to her. “Coming?”

Leia nodded and stood up, putting her hand in his. She wiped an errant tear with the other hand as the two of them left the table without another word.

Obi-Wan watched them leave, feeling the anguish that he had suffered on that terrible day so long ago all over again, the pain of it just as fresh.

“Quite a story,” Han commented. ‘You know I remember Anakin Skywalker,’ he added. “When I was a kid, he was the biggest hero around. We all wanted to be Anakin Skywalker when we grew up. What a waste... such a damn waste.”

Obi-Wan nodded. “Yes, that is exactly what it was,” he agreed. “A terrible, tragic waste.”

Imperial City— Coruscant

Emperor Palpatine had read the report from the late Governor Tarkin so many times he felt as though he had it committed to memory. The details of his apprentice’s betrayal were still so

shocking to him that there were still moments when he thought he would awaken and find that it had all been a terrible dream. But it was no dream; Vader was gone, he had defied his master, and aided a known enemy of the Empire to escape the Death Star. Not only that, he had absconded with the rebel band that had come to rescue her!

Palpatine knew all the details, he had read the reports of Vader's act of sabotage, of treason, of insubordination; but he was still puzzled by one simple question: why?

Why had he risked everything to save a haughty Alderaani princess who had been a thorn in the side of the Empire since before her eighteenth birthday? Why had he chosen her life over his, for there was no doubt that Vader realized he was risking execution for his treasonous actions. Why? Compassion was not the way of the Sith. Darth Vader was a Sith, of that Palpatine had no doubt. He knew the blackness of the Dark Lord's heart; knew the emptiness of his soul. So why would he be moved to save the life of someone who offered nothing in return? An enemy? A mere child? *A mere...child?*

Palpatine suddenly felt a hammering within his decrepit old body as his heart began to race. *Padmé Amidala was carrying Anakin Skywalker's child when she had died... or so it seemed...* Was it possible that her death had been a ruse to fool Vader and his master? Palpatine's sinister mind raced as he thought of the possibilities; if the offspring of Anakin Skywalker had indeed survived, that child would pose a grave threat to the Sith; such a threat that she or he would have been hidden away, concealed so that Vader would never know she existed. *Was Leia Organa that child? Was that the reason Vader had done everything in his power to protect her?* It made sense— in fact it was the only logical explanation that Palpatine could conceive of. Darth Vader was not a man prone to compassion or mercy; his cold-bloodedness was well known throughout the galaxy. What he had done on the Death Star was unheard of, illogical, and completely out of character for the Dark Lord. They were not the actions of a Sith; *they were the actions of a father protecting his child...*

Palpatine stood up from his throne and walked over to his computer terminal. He brought up the Imperial intelligence network's file on the Princess Leia Organa. A holographic image was part of this file, and this was what he was most interested. He had only seen Leia Organa in person once in his life, and that was when she was a young girl. Now she was a young woman. Looking at her image now, he was astonished to see the resemblance she bore another young senator Palpatine had once known: Padmé Amidala.

"So, Lord Vader, it seems you have learned the truth after all these years," Palpatine muttered with a frown. "And now you have found your child." He considered his options for a moment, and then a smile formed on his gruesome face. *You will pay for your treachery, Vader,* he vowed silently as an idea formed in his mind. *You will pay with the thing you love most, and you will learn the price of betrayal.*

Chapter 19

Chapter 19

Vader woke to find a medidroid peering into his face.

"Don't do that," he growled irritably.

The droid stepped back at once. "You're awake," it commented.

"Yes, I noticed," Vader replied, looking around the room.

"Dr. Drii has left orders that you are to get on your feet," the droid informed Vader.

On my feet? It's been a while since I had real feet, Vader reflected as he sat up in the bed with the droid's assistance. Slowly he swung his legs over the side of the bed. The floor beneath his feet was cold as he stared down at them, wiggling his toes.

What an odd sensation, he reflected as the droid helped him to stand up. The feeling of blood rushing into his new limbs caused a tingling all the way down to his brand new toes.

"Please inform me if you experience any pain or numbness," the droid said as it helped Vader walked across the room.

"I feel no pain," Vader said, realizing that it was the first time in twenty years that he was able to make such a statement. "There was some tingling in my toes when I first stood up, but it has passed."

"That is perfectly normal," the droid informed him. "It is merely the blood flowing into your new limbs."

Vader nodded. *That sounds strange,* he mused. "Let me try it alone," he told the droid.

"Very well," the droid replied, releasing Vader.

Vader stood still for a moment, ensuring that he had his balance. And then he took a step, and then another; and in no time he had crossed the room again.

"Very good, Lord Vader," the droid encouraged. "You are making remarkable progress."

Vader could not help but smile, something he had not done in many years until just recently, *until I found my children.*

"Now you must take it slowly at first," the droid cautioned as Vader crossed the room again, his pace quickening. But Vader would not hear of such a thing. *Since when do I take anything slowly?*

The door opened as Vader was walking toward it, revealing Dr. Deece. She was quite surprised to see Vader fully restored and up and moving about. She was struck not only by his youth, but by what a striking looking man he was. His eyes were the bluest she'd ever seen.

"You're looking very well," she told him. "Quite a remarkable transformation."

“Indeed it is,” Vader replied. “I half believe it myself.”

Deece nodded. “I have something for you,” she said. ‘I forgot about it until just today.’ She reached into the pocket of her tunic. “Your wife left this behind, and I thought it might be important.”

She withdrew her hand and pulled out a silver chain with a pendant around it. When Vader caught sight of it, his breath caught in his throat.

It was the japor snippet.

“She was wearing it when she was brought to us,” Deece explained as she handed the chain to Vader.

Vader looked at the silver chain in his hand, a thousand memories flashing through his mind.

I made this for you. So you’d remember me. I carved it out of a japor snippet... It will bring you good fortune.

It’s beautiful, but I don’t need this to remember you. Many things will change when we reach the capital, Ani. My caring for you will always remain.

I care for you too...

Dr. Deece watched him, seeing the emotions that this seemingly simple piece of jewelry evoked within him.

“I take it this was significant?” she asked tentatively.

Vader simply nodded, his eyes not leaving the pendant. “I made this for Padmé when we were both children,” he said softly.

Dr. Deece nodded. “Well then I’m glad I returned it to you.”

Vader looked up at her finally. “Thank you,” he said.

“You’re welcome,” She replied, and then left him.

As soon as she was gone, Vader sat down on the edge of the bed. He brought the pendant to his face and held it against his cheek, as though trying to feel the warmth of his wife’s body through the cold wooden snippet. He closed his eyes against the tears that filled them. The guilt, the anguish and years of loneliness came pouring out of him at the sight of the simple gift he had given his angel so long ago.

Padmé had worn the pendant every day after they were married, even when she slept, she never removed it. She had told him that it was more precious to her than all the sumptuous jewels and gowns she had worn as Queen of Naboo. *And she had left it behind...*

Although he had been told how his wife had lost her memory, he had held out a sliver of hope that it was not so, that the doctors had been mistaken, and misdiagnosed her. But Padmé would never have left it behind if she was indeed of sound mind. *She has no memory of our life together, no memory of the day we met, of our first kiss, of the day we were married, the wonderful times we shared...* The reality of this hit him hard as he grasped the japor snippet tightly in his fist. Although she may very well be alive, his Padmé was gone. She would not

know him even if he were able to find her; he would be but a stranger to her. She would not love him, and somehow that was far worse than if she was dead.

“Father?”

Vader looked up to see his children standing before him.

“This was your mother’s,” he said, opening his hand to show them the japor snippet. ‘I made it for her when we were children,’ he told them, staring down at the pendant. It was one of the only gifts I was ever able to give her, and she wore it every day of her life once we were married. And yet, she left it behind. “He looked up at his children, his eyes full of torment and pain.” She left it behind! She doesn’t have any memory of it, or of me... or of our life together.”

“Or of Mustafar?” Luke asked.

Vader closed his eyes as the tears ran down his face. “You know what happened there?” he asked tiredly.

“Obi-Wan told us,” Luke replied. “Everything, including what he did to you.”

Vader opened his eyes and looked at his son, trying to determine what was in his heart. Did Luke hate him for what he had done to Padmé? Or was there enough compassion in his heart to see what had caused him to do such a heinous thing?

“I have lived with the consequences of that day every day since,” Vader told his children. ‘For twenty years I believed that your mother died as a result of what I did, along with our unborn child. It was not until I met you, Leia, that I learned the truth. I learned that Palpatine had lied to me when he told me that I had killed your mother; he lied to me in order to keep me subservient. For twenty years that guilt and pain ate away at me; all I knew was darkness and despair. And then I found the two of you,’ he said. He stopped and looked down at the japor snippet in his hand once again. “I... I have never forgiven myself for what I did on that day,” he told them quietly. “Nor do I expect you to forgive me. Now that you know the entire truth, all the ugliness, I won’t blame you if you want nothing to do with me. I... I do not deserve your forgiveness, nor hers.”

Leia felt the emotions churning within her, confusing her utterly. Part of her wanted to hate her father for what he had done to her mother, to walk away and never look back. And yet another part of her could feel the torment that dwelled within her father’s soul. Had he not suffered enough already for what he had done? When was his debt considered paid? Were twenty years of painful, lonely anguish not enough?

Leia looked up at her brother, trying to read his emotions. He had not been as accepting of their father; would this be enough to sever the tenuous link that had begun to form between father and son?

“It wasn’t easy hearing what happened on Mustafar,” Luke said at last. ‘I can’t even imagine what you went through... or what Mother went through,’ he stopped, not even certain what to say. “I don’t know what I’m feeling right now, to be perfectly honest. I’m sort of numb, and I don’t even know what to think or how to feel.”

Vader looked at his son and nodded. “I understand that,” he said. “You have had a lot thrust upon you in only a few days. Both of you have. Your lives have been turned upside

down by what you have learned about me, about your mother; I cannot blame you for being confused and angry.”

“It’s not anger that I feel,” Leia said, voicing her feelings for the first time.

Vader turned his eyes to hers, waiting for her to continue.

“It’s sadness,” she said, her voice thick with emotion. “Such profound sadness... it’s so tragic, what happened. It breaks my heart to think of what might have been if only...” she stopped as her emotions overwhelmed her. She covered her face with her hands as the tears she had fought to hold at bay finally broke through.

Vader felt his heart ache as his daughter wept. He wanted to comfort her, wanted to take her into his arms and tell her that everything was going to be alright; but how could he do that if did he know what the future held? Besides, would she even want to be comforted by him now that she knew the extent of his atrocities?

Vader stood up. He looked at his son, who was struggling with his own emotions. Tentatively Vader put his hands upon Leia’s shoulders. She jumped a bit at the unexpected contact and took her hands away from her face to look up at him. Looking up into her father’s brilliant blue eyes, she saw the depth of his love for her.

“I’m so sorry,” he said softly. “So very sorry.”

Leia allowed him to draw her close to him, much to his surprise. Vader wrapped his arms around her as she wept.

Chapter 20

Chapter 20

Vader looked up at his son, who stood watching the emotional scene before him. Vader could feel the young man's confusion and uncertainty.

"Why doesn't she remember anything?" Luke asked.

Vader released Leia, and she looked up at him expectantly, waiting for his reply.

"Your mother had a very difficult time when you were born," he told them. "The doctor told me that she feared your mother would die. She was traumatized, both physically and emotionally by all that had happened, and slipped into a coma. She was unconscious for almost two weeks, and when she woke up, she had no memories of her previous life."

"That's why she left this behind," Leia said, touching the japor snippet in her father's hand. "She did not feel any connection to it anymore."

Vader shook his head. "No," he said softly, staring down at the pendant. 'I carved this for her when I was nine years old,' he told his children. "I was a slave, and she was a queen." He looked up at them. "And yet it meant more to her than any of the fine trappings of royalty."

Luke and Leia were silent, both full of questions, and yet overwhelmed by all that they had learned and needed yet to learn.

Luke turned his eyes to his father's. He could see the sincerity in them, and it only served to intensify his confusion. How could he reconcile the man standing before him with the monster Obi-Wan had described? The man before him wanted desperately to heal the family that his actions had torn apart; and yet the past could not be ignored. Darth Vader had murdered hundreds, many of them younglings; he had turned on his own pregnant wife and attacked her viciously. And yet Luke could feel the pain that his father carried, the guilt and the shame of what he had done to the one he loved more than anyone. Did love that great merit a second chance?

"I *will* find your mother," Vader told his children. "And somehow we will help her to come back to us."

"I want to go with you," Luke said at last. "Leia does too, don't you?"

Vader looked down at his daughter. "Yes, I do," she replied.

"No," Vader stated flatly. "Out of the question."

"Why?" Luke argued. "We want to find her as much as you do!"

"I am not questioning that," Vader replied. "It is simply too dangerous. You are far safer with the Rebel Alliance where you will be well hidden."

"We don't need to be hidden," Leia countered. "Why is it alright for you to risk danger and not us?"

"The emperor has undoubtedly come to realize who you are," he told his daughter. "And now that he knows, he will not rest until he finds you."

"How could he know?" Leia replied. "I was raised by the Organa family, what connection could he possibly make to you?"

"My actions while you were on board the Death Star were most....irregular," he replied. "The emperor has no doubt been given a full report on these actions. It would not take him long to put it together. He did, after all, know of my marriage and of your mother's pregnancy. I will not allow him to find you, Leia. I will not allow him to bring you harm.' He turned to his son. "Nor you, Luke. It is only a matter of time before he learns the name of the rebel who destroyed his beloved Death Star. And when he hears the name Skywalker, he will know exactly who you are. And when that happens, he will hunt you down, not stopping until he has found you."

"Your father is right," Obi-Wan said from the doorway. He looked directly at Vader. "It is good to see you, old friend."

Vader merely nodded in response.

"But it won't be enough merely to keep them hidden," Obi-Wan continued. "They must also be trained, should a confrontation with Palpatine become inevitable."

"And who will train them, you?" Vader asked pointedly.

"Will the two of you stop talking as though Luke and I are invisible?" Leia said hotly. "I think both of us are perfectly capable of defending ourselves."

"You don't understand, Leia," Vader replied, turning to his daughter. "Palpatine is a powerful Sith! Do not let his age and feeble appearance fool you. He is very strong, very powerful; neither you nor Luke would stand a chance against him without some rudimentary training."

"Father is right," Luke said. 'From the little training I did receive, I know that much.' He looked at Obi-Wan. "Ben can train us," he said. "He's already begun training me."

"No master can train two apprentices," Vader stated, folding his arms over his chest. "Especially when those apprentices are so old."

"Old?" Leia replied. "I'm not even twenty! Since when is that old?"

Vader smiled at his daughter. "I was rejected by the Jedi Council when I was nine because they said I was too old."

"Most Jedi start their training as infants, Leia," Obi-Wan told her. "But considering that the two of you are the children of the Chosen One, I think a little leeway can be permitted."

"The Chosen One?" Luke asked.

"The greatest of all the Jedi, the one who will bring balance to the Force and destroy the Sith," Leia informed him, looking at her father with a smile.

Luke looked up at his father. "Is that you?"

Vader shrugged. "Perhaps," he said. "Some seemed to think so."

"No perhaps about it," Obi-Wan put in. "There is no doubt that your father is the one spoken of in Jedi prophecy; at least not in my mind."

"The Jedi Council, however, did not always share your convictions, Obi-Wan," Vader pointed out.

"That is true, but many did," Obi-Wan replied. "Besides, when did you ever care what the Jedi Council thought?" he added.

"Quite true," Vader acknowledged. "But all this discussion is superfluous. We have more pressing matters at hand."

"Yes, of course," Obi-Wan said, looking back at the twins. "I think I know of a solution." He paused for a moment, a small part of him unsure if he ought to divulge the secret he had kept for twenty years of the only other living Jedi. *But if I don't, the New Order may never stand a chance...*

"What is it?" Vader asked.

"Master Yoda," Obi-Wan replied, looking at Vader. "He is alive."

Vader registered surprise at hearing this. "Indeed? I had no idea he had survived. Where is he?"

Again Obi-Wan hesitated, and Vader sensed it, as well as the reason why he did so.

"I assure you I have no ill intent towards him," Vader assured him. 'If he is alive, he would be a most fitting choice to train either Luke or Leia.' He looked at his children. "But I suppose perhaps they ought to be consulted," he said, remembering his daughter's protests earlier. "They are adults, after all. The choice should be theirs."

Luke and Leia looked at their father, appreciating his words. But was there even a choice to be made? It was clear that as the children of Anakin Skywalker, they would be targets for his greatest enemy, the galactic emperor Palpatine. It was no secret that Palpatine was obsessed with power, almost to the point of madness. If he could use the children of the Chosen One to bring him more, then he would stop at nothing to see that happen. Clearly they were no match for him untrained. But trained, that was a different story.

"I want to continue my apprenticeship," Luke said at last. "I want to learn the ways of the Force, and become a Jedi, like my father," he added, looking at Vader.

Vader smiled at his son, immense pride filling his heart.

"And so do I," Leia added. "I never imagined that I could be a Jedi; but if you think I have the ability to do so, then I have an obligation to follow that path."

Vader nodded, pleased with his daughter's sense of honor. He put a hand on one of Luke's shoulders, and the other on one of Leia's. "Palpatine will be no match for the two of you," he told them.

Imperial City-Coruscant

True to his word, Vyr Zhar-Khan returned to the Imperial palace with news for the emperor. Palpatine had been waiting anxiously for Zhar-Khan's return for what seemed to

him like an eternity; yet he had faith in the heartless mercenary, for Zhar-Khan had never let him down before.

"He's here," one of the royal guards announced to the emperor who was dining in the solitude of his sumptuous bed chamber.

Palpatine looked up. "Yes I know," he replied. He wiped his mouth with a napkin and pushed himself away from the table. "Show him in."

The sentry bowed deeply and left the emperor's presence. Moments later, the large imposing figure of Vyr Zhar-Khan filled the doorway.

"You have some information?" Palpatine asked without preamble.

Zhar-Khan nodded, strolling into the room with an air of self satisfaction.

"Well? Out with it then," snapped Palpatine, annoyed by the young man's arrogance.

"Skywalker," Zhar-Khan said simply. "Luke Skywalker."

Palpatine rose slowly to his feet. "Are you sure?" he demanded.

"Since when do I screw up?" Zhar-Khan replied with a smirk.

The next thing he knew he was slammed up against the far wall, a jolt of energy surging through him briefly.

"Save your sarcasm for the whores and other miscreants whose company you keep," Palpatine snarled as he approached the stunned young man. "I asked you a question!"

Zhar-Khan struggled to his feet, shocked by the old man's unexpected attack.

"Yes, yes I'm sure," Zhar-Khan replied at last as he slowly stood up. "My source is completely reliable. Luke Skywalker is without a doubt the rebel who destroyed the Death Star."

Palpatine nodded as the implications of this information sunk in. *Amidala bore twins... so much the better...* He looked at the young man before him. "I have a proposition for you, Zhar-Khan," he said, his tone less menacing. "That is, if you are interested."

"I'm not sure," Zhar-Khan replied warily. "What sort of proposition are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about becoming my right hand," Palpatine replied. "You are strong with the Force, Zhar-Khan. With training, you could become a powerful Sith."

Zhar-Khan was intrigued. "You mean, like Vader? Like you?"

Palpatine smiled slowly. "Don't flatter yourself," he snapped. "Does that interest you? It would bring you great powers, Zhar-Khan, not to mention the... monetary benefits."

"You don't say?" Zhar-Khan replied, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. "Well then I am interested, very interested."

Palpatine nodded. *He will never be another Vader, but he's young, and easily manipulated... he will do...*

“A strong Sith you will make,” Palpatine told him. “From now on you shall be known as....Darth Ferreus.”

Zhar-Khan felt himself being forced to his knees in a gesture of fealty. “Thank you, Master.”

Chapter 21

Chapter 21

Polis Massa Outpost

After some discussion it was decided that Obi-Wan would remain with the Rebel Alliance and train Leia, while Luke would seek out Yoda in the Dagobah System. Neither Luke nor Leia wanted to leave their father; but realized that their absence would not go unnoticed. The Rebel fleet had assembled by this point, and was about to make its way to their new base in the Hoth System. The future was uncertain for all of them as they prepared to part ways.

"Do you have a plan for finding Mother?" Leia asked her father as they took one last meal together.

"I will go to Naboo," Vader replied. "It is logical that she would go there, it is her home."

"But if she has no memories of her past, would she know that?" Han asked.

"She would know instinctively," Vader replied. "Just as she would be able to walk, or eat, or fly a ship. Some things are simply ingrained and do not rely upon memory."

"Wasn't it Naboo in the vision you shared?" Obi-Wan asked.

"Yes, I believe it was," Vader replied.

"Assuming you find her, how do you plan to get her to remember you?" Luke asked. "Is it even possible for the amnesia to be reversed?"

"The doctor described it as disassociative amnesia," Vader explained. "Which in layman's terms means she is blocking out memories that are too painful to deal with."

"I can't imagine what her life has been like for the past twenty years," Leia said softly. "Hopefully she has been able to find some happiness."

Vader nodded. "She has family on Naboo," he told them. "That is where I plan to go first, her parents."

"A good plan," Obi-Wan said. "Assuming of course that they are still alive."

"Yes, of course," Vader replied.

"Will they even know you?" Luke asked. "If you and Mother's marriage was secret?"

"I met them once," Vader told his son. "When I was assigned to protect Padmé, before we were married. They knew nothing of our marriage, but I will not be a complete stranger to them."

"Well, I hate to be the voice of responsibility," Han said, "really; but if we're gonna meet up with the fleet, we need to get going."

"Yes, you're right," Leia said, looking up at Han.

Vader watched the way his daughter and the Corellian pilot looked at one another, decidedly disturbed by it. *He's not good enough for her*, he thought darkly. *Not to mention that he's far too old...*

"What are your plans once you find Padmé?" Obi-Wan asked as they walked to the hangar bay. "Will you join the Rebellion?"

"The Rebellion considers me their enemy," Vader replied. 'As does the Empire. I have no idea where my destiny will take me,' he admitted. "Right now all I'm focusing on is finding Padmé, and doing everything I can to bring her back."

"If anyone can do it, Anakin, it's you," Obi-Wan said.

Vader looked at Obi-Wan. "I hope you're right," he said.

Chewbacca exited the Falcon and announced that they were ready for departure.

"Well, looks like we're all set," Han said. He turned to Vader. "Good luck, sir," he said, not sure how he ought to address Vader.

Vader nodded at Han, part of him uneasy at the thought of his daughter being in Han's company, particularly now that Luke would be departing for Dagobah within a few weeks.

"Please consider joining us," Leia said to her father, taking his hand. "We need you on our side."

Vader smiled at her, touching her face with his hand. "I will consider it," he told her. "I promise."

Leia nodded. "Thank you," she said. "I will miss you," she told him.

Vader was touched by his daughter's words, and by the feelings behind them. He put his arms around her and held her close, kissing the top of her head. "I will miss you too," he told her. "But our destinies lie along different paths, Leia. At least for now."

"I know," she replied.

"Good bye, Father," Luke said as Vader released Leia from his embrace. "I hope our paths cross again very soon."

Vader smiled, and put a hand on Luke's shoulder. "I hope so too, Luke. May the Force be with you, my son," he said.

"You too," Luke replied. "I hope your search is a short and successful one."

"Yes, so do I," Vader replied. "I'll find her Luke; that I promise you."

"May the Force be with you, Anakin," Obi-Wan said next to Vader. "Good luck with your search."

"I didn't think you believed in luck," Vader observed wryly.

Obi-Wan laughed. "Well it's been my experience that with you, Anakin, anything is possible."

This comment made Vader smile despite himself. "I am trusting you with my daughter's training, old man," he said. "Don't make me regret that."

"Well if Leia proves to be half as stubborn as you, it will be me who needs the luck," Obi-Wan replied pointedly.

"I can't tell if they're friends or enemies," Han commented to Leia.

"I'm not certain they know themselves," she replied with a smile.

Vader watched as his children ascended the ramp with Solo and Kenobi. Leia turned back once more to look at him, and smiled when she caught his eye. Vader hated to see his children leave. Their presence in his life had been so unexpected, but it brought him more joy than he ever imagined he could ever feel again. They made him feel as though there *was* good in him still, even after everything he had done. *If I had a part in creating them, there must be some modicum of good in me...*

Vader watched as the *Falcon* lifted off from the landing platform and took off into space. And then he returned to the medical facility.

Despite his obvious impatience, Dr. Drii ensured that Vader remained at the medical facility for twenty-four more hours. If he'd had things his way, Vader would have remained for another three days; but he realized that he was lucky to get Vader to agree to one.

"Thank you again for the clothes," Vader told the physician as Drii performed one final physical on his most remarkable patient.

"Well I didn't expect that you would want to wear the breath suit anymore," Drii remarked.

"No, most definitely not," Vader replied. "In fact, do me a favor and destroy it."

"I will see to it personally," Drii replied. "May I ask you something?" he asked as he set down his diagnostic tool.

Vader, who was buttoning up the tunic Drii had provided him with, looked up. "Yes," he said simply.

"Who do you consider yourself to be?" Drii asked. "I mean, are you Vader? Or are you Anakin Skywalker now?"

Vader remained silent as he finished the buttons. "I am not entirely certain," he replied at last. "Both, perhaps; perhaps neither. But one thing is clear; I cannot use the name Darth Vader once I leave this facility. The emperor is no doubt scouring the galaxy for me."

Drii nodded. "Yes, that is true. But isn't the name Anakin Skywalker just as well known?"

"Yes, it is," Vader replied. "Clearly I cannot use either name. I will have to come up with a suitable pseudonym."

"A wise precaution," Drii replied. "Well, you are in excellent health," he decided. "And certainly the most remarkable patient I have ever had. Your recovery has been nothing short of miraculous."

Vader picked up the japor snippet from the small table beside his bed. "I have been motivated to recover," he told the physician as he slipped the chain around his neck. He tucked the pendant under his shirt. "Thank you for everything, Doctor. I owe you my life."

"I hope you find all that you are searching for, Anakin Skywalker," Drii replied.

"Thank you, Doctor," Vader replied, holding out his hand to the physician. "So do I."

Millennium Falcon-en route to the Hoth System

Leia sat watching her brother as he practiced with his lightsaber in the hold of the small freighter. He already handled it so easily, so effortlessly; it made Leia start to wonder if she would ever be able to catch up to him. But both her father and Obi-Wan seemed to think she had the same ability as Luke, something which Leia was still having trouble difficulty wrapping her mind around.

"Well done, Luke," Obi-Wan encouraged as Luke removed the blast helmet. 'You've improved tremendously.' He turned to Leia. "Maybe you'd like to have a turn now."

Leia's eyes widened. "Me?" she said. "I... I don't even have a lightsaber."

"Use mine," Luke said, handing the weapon to his sister. "It was Father's, you know."

"Was it?" Leia asked as she took the lightsaber from Luke's hands. She looked down at it, trying to imagine what her father was like when he built it. Was he still a padawan? Was he married to their mother? Had he begun his fall to the Dark Side?

"We will have to build you your own weapon, Leia," Obi-Wan said. "But for now, see what you can do with this one."

Leia frowned uncertainly. "Okay, if you insist."

She activated the saber and jumped a little when its bright blue blade jumped to life.

"How does it feel?" Luke asked, smiling at his sister as he sat down with Obi-Wan.

"It feels... different," Leia replied as she slowly moved the weapon back and forth, getting a feel for the heft and the weight of it. "I don't know that I'll ever be able to handle it as easily as you do, Luke."

"Well this saber was built by a man for a man," Obi-Wan replied. "Your father in fact. Every Jedi makes their weapon to suit them self."

Leia nodded in understanding. "Makes sense," she said. 'I hope you intend on showing me how to build one,' she said to Obi-Wan. "I'd have no idea whatsoever how to do so."

Obi-Wan nodded. "Of course," he said. "Just as I taught your father how to build his first lightsaber when he was a boy."

Leia smiled. "What was he like when he was a boy?" she asked as she slashed through the air with the saber, growing more comfortable with the feel of the weapon in her hand.

"He was extremely kind, loving, generous," Obi-Wan replied as he remembered. "He was gifted in many respects, particularly mechanics and piloting. All in all, a truly remarkable boy."

“And he was a slave?” Luke asked.

Obi-Wan nodded. “Yes, he and his mother both. My master, Qui-Gon Jinn, managed to free Anakin, but Shmi was left behind on Tatooine. I don’t think your father ever forgave himself for leaving her; you see, she was killed about ten years later by Tusken Raiders.”

“That’s so sad,” Leia said, turning off the saber. “He’s suffered a lot of pain in his life, hasn’t he?”

Obi-Wan nodded. “Yes, he has. No doubt it was part of the reason he succumbed to the Dark Side.”

“But he has renounced the Dark Side, hasn’t he?” Luke asked.

Obi-Wan sighed, running a hand over his beard thoughtfully. “I sensed a great deal of confusion in your father, Luke,” he replied. “He isn’t quite certain who he is at this point. But I have no doubt in my mind that he is on his way to redemption. Finding your mother will help him find his way back to the light.”

“And what if he doesn’t find her?” Leia asked. “What then?”

Obi-Wan frowned. “I don’t know,” he replied quietly. “I’m not certain he could stand to lose her a second time, and I fear it might serve to send him spiraling back into the Darkness.”

“We can’t let that happen,” Luke said. “I didn’t find my father only to lose him again.”

“I won’t let that happen,” Leia vowed. “No matter what it takes.”

Obi-Wan smiled. “You do your parents proud, both of you.”

Han entered the hold at this point. “There’s a message coming in for you, Princess,” he said. “From Alderaan.”

“Probably the Viceroy,” Obi-Wan suggested. “No doubt he is worried about you.”

Leia nodded. “I’m sure,” she said. “I’ll be right back.”

She had not admitted it to anyone, but Leia had begun to feel conflicted by the situation she found herself in: namely, with two fathers. Bail Organa had raised her since she was an infant, had loved her as though she were his own child, and provided her with everything she could ever have wanted. He had been a good father to her, and she loved him dearly. But now her real father had returned to her life, and Leia would be lying to herself if she said that the bond between she and Vader was not a powerful one. She had felt it even before the Dark Lord had told her of their kinship; and since then, it had grown steadily stronger. He was a part of her, she a part of him. *So how do I reconcile the fact that I now have two fathers? Who do I call Father now?*

“Leia! Thank the Force you’re alright!” Bail Organa began as soon as Leia seated herself before the comm. screen.

“I’m fine,” she replied. “I have so much to tell you, I hardly know where to begin.”

“I’m sure,” he replied with a smile. “You can tell me as soon as you get home. I can’t wait to see you.”

"I... I'm not coming home," she told him, hating the look of disappointment in his eyes. "I've decided to stay with the Alliance. They need, me, Dad."

"Leia, you are nineteen years old," Organa replied sternly. "I hardly think you are old enough to make such a huge decision alone. Come home at once, and we will discuss this rationally."

Leia shook her head. "I'm not returning to Alderaan," she reiterated. "At least not right away. I found my brother, Dad; I found Luke."

The look on Organa's face told Leia immediately that his worst fears had been realized. "How?" he asked simply.

"He and I found one another on the Death Star," she explained. "He was with Obi-Wan Kenobi who had come to rescue me."

Organa nodded. "I see," he replied. "I'm just grateful they were able to do so. I had nightmares about the thought of you in the hands of those Imperial monsters."

Leia hesitated before saying anymore. Did he know who her father was? Of course, he must know... he had been there to adopt Leia mere hours after her birth. No doubt he knew everything, but had never thought it necessary to divulge any of that information.

"Why didn't you tell me about my real parents?" she asked at last. "Why didn't you tell me that Darth Vader was my father?"

Organa was too shocked to reply immediately, and so Leia continued.

"He is the reason I was able to escape the Death Star," she told him. "He is the reason Alderaan wasn't blown into a trillion bits of dust by the Death Star. I know that must be hard for you to believe, but it's true."

"Come home, Leia," Organa said in a low voice. "I'm begging you."

Leia shook her head. "No," she said. "I want to be with my brother; we are needed here. I will come home when I can."

"Leia please!"

But Leia did not want to hear anymore, and closed the transmission. She turned away from the screen, her hands trembling. "I'm sorry," she said softly. "But I can't be your little girl any more."

Chapter 22

Chapter 22

Vader left Polis Massa bound for Naboo less than twenty-four hours after the departure of his children. Piloting a star fighter without the cumbersome helmet and mask was a distinct pleasure, one he had forgotten after so many years.

The thought that Jobal and Ruwee Naberrie may no longer be alive had crossed Vader's mind more than once; if they were dead, then it would make his quest to find Padmé even more difficult. There was another thought that he had tried to ignore, but would not be ignored. What if Padmé herself was dead? A lot could happen in twenty years. He refused to let himself consider that possibility, *she is alive, and I will find her...*

He found himself awash with memories of his wife as he made his final approach to Naboo. It had been many years since he had been there, but the sight of it affected him just as it always had. It was here that he had known happiness, true happiness. It was here that he had declared his love to Padmé, that they had shared their first kiss, where they had been married and had consummated their love in an all too brief honeymoon. Who would he find here? Would he find the woman he loved, or a stranger who merely looked like her? *I will bring her back—she will remember me, I know she will...*

Using the Force to bypass the security measures at the landing bay in Theed, Vader left his craft and set out on foot into the city.

It felt good not to be noticed, not to have everyone stare at him with shock and fear. To be just another face in the crowd was something he never imagined he would experience again. It was one he enjoyed now, after being infamous for so long. Still, the face of Anakin Skywalker was not exactly a common one, so he kept the hood of his cloak up as an extra measure of anonymity.

The house where the Naberries lived was in a small village outside of Theed. It was a long walk, but Vader enjoyed it. It afforded him the opportunity to put his newly made body to the test, and he was pleased at how well it held up. It felt good to feel his heart and lungs working again without the need for artificial assistance.

After walking for close to two hours, Vader arrived at the home of Padmé's parents. He felt himself fill with anticipation as he approached the door. *Perhaps she was here... perhaps she has lived with her parents all these years...*

Activating the door chime, Vader waited for what seemed to be an eternity before someone came to the door. It was a young woman, perhaps a few years older than Luke and Leia. She looked suspiciously at him through the locked door. His heart sank as he realized what her presence meant; the Naberries no longer lived here.

"May I help you?" she asked.

"I hope so," he replied. "I'm looking for the Naberrie family. I know they used to live here. Do you have any idea where they might be?"

The young woman hesitated before answering. "Why do you want to know?" she asked.

"I was hoping they could help me find someone," he explained. "Someone very important to me, their daughter, Padmé."

A startled look came across the woman's face at the mention of Padmé, and it made Vader thinking that perhaps he had not hit a dead end after all.

"Please, if you know anything about her, I beg you to tell me where I can find her," he said.

Vader could sense the young woman's hesitation and confusion. *She knows where Padmé is but is afraid to tell me anything...*

"What is your name?" she asked at last.

"Anakin Skywalker," he replied without hesitation.

"Wait here," she said, and then disappeared inside the house.

So much for using an assumed name, he thought when he realized how quickly he had used the name he had been rejecting for so long. He didn't have time to consider what this could mean, for the young woman returned to the door. She unlocked it and opened it for him. "Come in," she said. "My grandmother wants to see you."

"Your grandmother?" Anakin asked. "You're... you're Sola's daughter, aren't you?"

"Yes," she replied as she led Anakin through the house. "I'm Ryoo Naberrie. I've lived with my grandmother since my grandfather passed away three years ago."

So Ruwee was dead... "I'm sorry to hear that," Anakin said.

Ryoo nodded. "It's been a difficult time for the family," she replied as they entered the parlor. "Since Aunt Padmé came home."

Anakin frowned. "Where is she? What has become of her?"

"Anakin Skywalker, it truly is you."

Anakin looked over to see Jobal Naberrie sitting in an armchair in front of a large picture window. She was very frail looking, and looked as though she had aged more than the twenty three years since Anakin had last seen her.

"Mrs. Naberrie," Anakin said, sitting down across from her. "It's good to see you. I was sorry to hear about your husband's passing."

Jobal nodded. "Thank you," she replied. 'I didn't expect to ever see you again,' she told him. "I thought you'd been killed in the Jedi Purges."

The irony of her statement was not lost on Anakin. "No, I... I managed to survive," he told her, wanting to spare her the horrible truth of what had become of him. "I've come here hoping you can tell me where Padmé is, Mrs. Naberrie."

"I have to tell you that I'm rather surprised by your interest in her whereabouts after so long, Anakin," Jobal remarked. "It's been more than twenty years since you and she were here together."

"Yes, I know that," Anakin said, looking down at his boots. "I have spent the past twenty years believing her dead, Mrs. Naberrie, and have only recently found out that I was deceived."

Jobal frowned. "I'm afraid I still don't understand..." she began.

"Padmé is my wife," he interjected, looking up at her. "We were secretly married a few weeks after we were here in this house."

"Married??" Jobal exclaimed, her eyes widening in shock. "You and Padmé were married? Why didn't she tell us?"

"As a Jedi, I was forbidden from getting married," he explained. "That is the reason you weren't told. We could tell no one."

Jobal did not reply, and Anakin began to grow fearful for the old woman's health.

"I'm sorry you had to find out like this," he said. "Truly I am."

"I had a feeling that there was more going on between you two than Padmé let on," Jobal said at last. "But I had no idea it was that serious."

"I love Padmé, Mrs. Naberrie," Anakin told her. "I have loved her since the moment I met her, and have never stopped loving her, even when I thought she was dead all these years. But now that I know she is alive, I must find her. Won't you help me? Please?"

Jobal nodded. "Yes, I will help you, Anakin, but first you must tell me why she ended up the way she did, alone on the streets of Theed with no idea who she was."

"Is that how you found her?" Anakin asked, trying desperately to piece together the entire picture from the fractured bits of information she was giving him.

"It wasn't me who found her," Jobal told her. "It was Palo, a childhood friend. He found her and brought her to his home, or rather the home he runs for those who are in need of a place to stay, people who are suffering from some sort of mental break down. He took Padmé in, and then came and told Ruwee and me what had happened. We came to see her at once, but she didn't know who we were," she related, her eyes filling with tears. "She knew no one, Anakin, and had no memory of anything before arriving here."

Anakin listened to his mother-in-law's narrative, his anxiety growing by the minute. The thought that it was Palo, the first man Padmé had ever kissed, who had found her made him see red with jealousy.

"Padmé gave birth to twins days before she came here," Anakin told her. "A girl and a boy. She had a very difficult time, and the doctors nearly lost her. She was in a coma for almost two weeks as a result of the complications, and when she awoke, she had no memory of her previous life."

"Why did you let her leave if she was in such a delicate state?" Jobal asked.

"I was not with her when the twins were born," he told her. "I had been in a terrible accident on that same day, and nearly died myself. When I was conscious, I asked about her, where she was—and I was told that she had died. I trusted the person who told me, and spent the next twenty years believing she was dead."

"So how did you find out the truth?" Jobal asked.

"I found our twins," he told her. "Luke and Leia. They had been separated at birth, since the doctors thought Padmé wasn't going to make it; but have been reunited and now know the truth. I told them that I would find their mother and bring her back to us. And I mean to do that, Mrs. Naberrie. I know she doesn't remember her past, but I will help her, I swear it. I will do whatever it takes to bring her back."

Jobal smiled at him. "You really do love her, don't you?"

"Yes," he said. "With all my heart. Will you take me to her? Please?"

Jobal nodded. "Yes, I will."

Jobal filled Anakin in on more details as they made their way to the home where Padmé lived. Apparently she had managed to develop a relationship with her parents and sister, despite not having any memory of them. Jobal and Ruwee had gone to visit her every day, but were unable to convince her to leave the safety of the place she had come to think of as home. It had puzzled them that she was not willing to leave, but they respected her wishes, and did not force the issue. So long as she felt safe, and was relatively happy, that was good enough for them. Jobal had to wonder if the same would be true of Anakin.

Images from his dream returned to him as Anakin and Jobal approached the large home where Padmé had lived for the past twenty years. He saw the high stone wall, and heard the rush of a distant waterfall. Trees surrounded the wall, bending their heavy branches over the wall, just as they had in his dream.

"We will need to check in with administration," Jobal explained as they got out of the speeder. "Palo only allows her family to see her; but as her husband, you qualify as family."

Anakin did not reply, but he felt a surge of anger at the thought of Palo having so much control over his wife. Padmé's parents had been unsuccessful at convincing Padmé to leave, but he was determined to do so.

"Mrs. Naberrie, how are you today?" the young nurse greeted her as they entered the main office.

"I'm fine, thanks Thea," Jobal replied. "How is my daughter today?"

"She's in a good mood," Thea replied. 'You've come at the perfect time for a visit.' She looked up at Anakin appraisingly. "And are you a member of the family?" she asked, giving him a smile.

"Yes I am," he replied, ignoring the young woman's attempt to charm him.

"May we go in?" Jobal asked.

"Yes, go on in," Thea replied. "I believe you'll find her in the garden."

“Thank you,” Jobal replied. She turned to Anakin. “This way,” she said, leading the way.

Anakin was overwhelmed by the tumult of emotions he sensed as he walked through the quiet corridors. *Pain... despair... fear... loneliness...* He tried to shut them out, but they were everywhere, all pervading. He focused his mind on trying to seek out Padmé’s, but her aura was no present, at least not the one he recognized. As they grew closer to the quadrangle in the center of the facility, he sensed a vaguely familiar presence. *Padmé...*

“There she is,” Jobal said as they reached the large double doors that lead outside.

Anakin stepped over to the door and looked outside, his heart in his throat. And then he saw her.

She was walking amid the rose bushes, just as she had in his dream. Anakin felt his throat constrict when he saw her face. She was as beautiful as he had remembered, the years not having affected her tremendously; but her eyes were empty. Padmé had always expressed herself with her beautiful eyes. How many emotions had Anakin seen in those eyes: love, desire, anger, fear, joy... but now they were vacant, as though she was incapable of feeling emotion any more *or perhaps unwilling to?* *This isn’t right*, Anakin thought to himself. *Something is wrong...*

“Let me go in first and tell her she has a visitor,” Jobal told him. “You realize of course she won’t know you,” she added.

Anakin merely nodded, not taking his eyes off of his wife.

Jobal left him and pushed open the double doors. Anakin watched Padmé react to her mother. She smiled at her, but the smile never reached her eyes. Clearly she recognized and even loved her mother, for she hugged her back when Jobal embraced her; but the sparkle that was so typically Padmé was not there. Anakin felt hot tears roll down his face as he watched Jobal tell Padmé that he was there. What was he telling her? That her husband was there? *The husband who tried to kill you and abandoned you for a pack of lies and empty promises??*

Jobal looked over at where Anakin stood and motioned for him to come in. Anakin wiped his tears with the sleeve of his cloak, and pushed the doors open, his heart pounding within him.

He walked towards the spot where Padmé stood with her mother, willing himself to be strong. But when Padmé turned and her eyes met his, he felt his strength give way. There was no joy in her eyes at seeing him, no sign of recognition; merely a vague sense of curiosity, and more than a little trepidation. He forced himself to smile at her, knowing that his reaction to her would mean nothing to her in her present state.

“Hello Padmé,” he said, fighting the urge to take her into his arms and hold her. “It’s good to see you.”

“Hello,” she replied. “I’m sorry, I’m afraid I don’t remember your name.”

“It’s Anakin,” he said. “Anakin Skywalker.”

Padmé nodded. “It’s nice to meet you, Anakin,” she said.

Anakin looked briefly at his mother-in-law for support. She could not meet his gaze, and merely looked down at the cobblestone under their feet.

“Thank you,” he said softly. “This is a beautiful garden,” he said, grasping for anything to say to her.

“Yes, it is,” she replied, looking around. “I love it here. It makes me feel safe and... happy for some reason.”

“You always did love flowers,” he commented.

Padmé looked back at him. “You... knew me from before?” she asked.

Anakin nodded, not knowing if he was supposed to tell her so or not and not caring at this point. “Yes, we’ve known one another for a long time, Padmé,” he told her. “Since we were both children.”

Padmé looked back at her mother, bewildered and troubled by his words.

Jobal merely smiled at her. “It’s alright, Padmé,” she said. “He’s telling you the truth.”

Padmé looked back at Anakin. “Will you tell me about it?” she asked. “Will you tell me about when we were children?”

Anakin smiled, a small flicker of hope igniting in his heart. “Yes, I will.”

Chapter 23

Chapter 23

Palo Corrino was not a man who liked to be trifled with. He had left strict orders with his staff that only those people he had approved were permitted to visit Padmé Amidala. So when he passed through the upper story gallery that over looked the quadrangle, he stopped in his tracks when he saw a man he did not recognize talking to Padmé.

Furious, he strode to the front office, where the young woman who had shown in Jobal and Anakin was sitting reading a juicy romance novel.

“Miss Mereel,” he said as he stood in front of her desk.

Thea looked up, startled by the voice of her boss. “Oh, you startled me! What can I do for you sir?”

“You can tell me who the man is talking to Padmé Amidala,” he snapped, folding his arms over his chest. “I do not remember authorizing someone matching his description to see her.”

“He came with Padmé’s mother,” Thea explained. “She verified that he was a member of the family. I’m sorry sir, but I figured that if she okayed it, he must be family.”

Palo frowned. “I have the final authority here, Miss Mereel,” he reminded her. “What is this man’s name? Did you at least get a name?”

“No, I’m afraid I didn’t,” she replied. “I’m sorry, sir.”

Palo shook his head. “Very sloppy, Miss Mereel,” he admonished her. “Very sloppy indeed.” He turned on his heel and walked away in the direction of the quadrangle. Thea watched him go, rolling her eyes when he was out of sight. She then returned to her novel, picturing a striking, tall blue eyed man as the hero of the story.

“Well, let’s see,” Anakin began as he sat down with Padmé on a stone bench. Jobal had discreetly made her way to the other side of the garden to give them some time alone. ‘We met in a junk shop on Tatooine,’ he told her with a smile. “I was working there, and you were there with a man named Qui-Gon Jinn looking for parts to repair your ship.”

“A junk shop?” she asked. “We met in a junk shop?”

Anakin nodded. “Not terribly exciting, I know. Do you want to know what my first words to you were?”

“Yes,” she replied at once.

“I asked you if you were an angel,” he told her.

“Why did you ask me that?” she asked.

“Well, I had always heard the deep space pilots talking about the angels of the moons Iego, and how they were the most beautiful creatures in the universe,” he explained. “And you were

the most beautiful girl I had ever seen,” he added with a smile.

Padmé’s face turned pink, and she averted her eyes from his. He could sense how uneasy his words made her, and regretted being so candid with her. But it was so hard not to; this was the woman to whom he had bared his very soul. How could he pretend to be anything but madly in love with her?

“I need to know something,” she said quietly, not looking up at him.

“You may ask me anything you wish,” he replied.

She looked back up at him, her dark eyes full of confusion. “Who are you? I know your name, but I need to know why you are here, why you came to see me. Who am I to you that you would want to see me?”

Anakin hesitated before responding. *Do I tell her the truth? What would it do to her to learn it?*

“I don’t believe we have met.”

Anakin looked up to see a tall thin man standing before him. He had curly dark hair and green eyes. *Palo.*

“You are interrupting,” Anakin said. “Something I’ve always considered bad manners.”

Palo lifted one eyebrow, trying not to look unprofessional in front of Padmé. He looked at her, not wishing to upset her with the inevitable confrontation he sensed was imminent. “Padmé, would you excuse us please?” he said gently, a smile on his face. “I need to speak to your visitor.”

Padmé stood up at once. “Of course,” she replied. She started to walk away, and then turned and looked at Anakin once more. He watched her, holding her eyes with his own, until she turned away again.

“Under the circumstances, I believe a little rudeness was necessary,” Palo said once Padmé was out of ear shot. “I am Palo Corrino. I am the administrator of this facility, and Padmé’s guardian. Who might *you* be?”

Anakin stood up, allowing his imposing physical stature to intimidate the man before he spoke. “I am Anakin Skywalker,” he replied. “I am Padmé’s husband.”

Palo did not respond immediately, for he was too shocked to do so. *So this is Anakin*, he thought, sizing up the daunting man standing before him. *This is the man who Padmé cried for every night for weeks...*

“Her husband?” Palo said at last. “You’ll forgive me if I don’t believe you.”

Anakin narrowed his eyes, feeling hatred for the pompous administrator filling him. “I don’t give a damn what you believe,” he replied. “Padmé is my wife; she has been my wife for more than twenty years. Whether or not you believe that is irrelevant to me.”

“But it is not irrelevant to me,” Palo replied coldly. “I have spent the past two decades caring for her. If you are truly her husband, you’d have been the one to do that, instead of leaving her to wander the streets of Theed alone like a...”

Palo did not finish his sentence, for he felt Anakin's large hand around his throat, preventing him from speaking.

"Do not for a moment think that I would hesitate to kill you for what you are thinking at this very moment," Anakin warned Palo, his voice low and threatening. "You know nothing, administrator."

Palo stared with wide eyes at Anakin, terrified beyond words. He felt Anakin's grip relax, and he finally released him. Palo commenced coughing and sputtering as he struggled to catch his breath. *Who is this Anakin Skywalker?? And why would Padmé marry such a dangerous, volatile man?*

"I want to see the records of Padmé's care while in this facility," Anakin told him, having calmed down. "I want to see everything, every doctor's note, every dosage of medication, everything. And I want to see it now."

"What makes you think that you can just walk in here after twenty years and start giving orders?" Palo said, rubbing his throat gingerly. "You've been estranged from her all this time and now all of a sudden you think that you can just come in here and turn her world upside down? If you cared at all about her well being, you'd leave her the hell alone!"

"You really don't get it do you?" Anakin replied, amazed by the man's nerve. "You are in no position to tell me what I can and cannot do. I know the law, administrator. I know that I am perfectly within my rights to see my wife's medical records. The way you are acting makes me suspect that you have something to hide, that there is something you do not wish me to see," he observed, watching Palo closely for his reaction.

Palo swallowed hard, doing his best not to lose his composure. "I have nothing to hide," he declared. "And you may very well be within your rights, but as a friend of Padmé's, I feel compelled to voice my concerns. You have no idea what she has gone through these past twenty years, I do. You weren't here when she cried herself to sleep every night, when she called your name until she was hoarse. You see, Mr. Skywalker, you have undoubtedly played a significant part in her condition. And now you expect me to allow you to enter her life and destroy her all over again."

"What is going on here?" Jobal demanded as she came over to the two men. "I can hear you shouting from the other side of the garden!"

"Where is Padmé?" Anakin asked.

"I took her back to her room," Jobal replied. "She is very confused by all this. And the two of your arguing doesn't make matters better."

Anakin looked at his mother-in-law, realizing that she was right. "I'm sorry," he told her. "This isn't easy for me, seeing her like that," he admitted. "She isn't the Padmé I know."

Jobal nodded. "No, I realize that," she said gently, putting a hand on his arm. "But you must be patient, Anakin. The fact that she was willing to speak to you at all is a very good sign, isn't it Palo?"

Palo hated to admit it, but it was. Padmé normally refused to speak to anyone other than her parents or her sister.

“Yes, I suppose it is,” he replied at last. “You caught her in a good mood.”

“Perhaps on some subconscious level she knows you,” Jobal suggested. “Perhaps you will be the one to unlock her memories.”

“I hope so,” Anakin replied.

“I wouldn’t pin too much hope on that happening,” Palo said. “She has shown no sign of remembering anything. It isn’t likely to happen now, after twenty years.”

“And yet she said my name,” Anakin pointed out, folding his arms over his chest. “Curious.”

“That’s true,” Jobal said, remembering. “I’d forgotten about that. But that was a long time ago, wasn’t it Palo?”

“Yes, many years,” he replied. “She hasn’t said it again since.”

“Even more curious,” Anakin remarked. “Those records, I’d like to see them now.”

“It will take me a while to assemble them,” Palo replied. “They are quite numerous, as you can well imagine.”

“I can wait,” Anakin replied. “Just download the information onto a datadisc. I wouldn’t want to hold you up any longer than necessary,” he said.

Palo could feel the back of his neck reddening in anger, but he said nothing. “As you wish,” he replied simply. “I will return shortly.”

Anakin watched Palo leave, sensing the man’s unease at filling his request. *What are you hiding, administrator?* He thought, for he felt certain that Palo was hiding something.

“Why do you want to see Padmé’s medical records?” Jobal asked.

“I don’t trust him,” Anakin said, still watching him retreat from the garden. “He’s hiding something.”

Jobal frowned. “He saved Padmé’s life, are you forgetting that?” she asked indignantly.

Anakin turned to her. “No, I’m not forgetting that,” he said. “And I am grateful to him for doing so. But something tells me that he is not being completely ethical, completely honest with you, with me, or especially with Padmé. I am seldom wrong about people, Mrs. Naberrie. But if I am, I’ll be the first to admit it.”

“And apologize to Palo as well?” she added.

Anakin sighed. “Yes, I suppose so,” he replied reluctantly.

“What is it you hope to find in those records?” she asked.

“I will know when I find it,” Anakin replied.

Padmé paced about in her suite, unsettled by the brief visit she’d just had. *Why did this man come to see me? Why does he look at me the way he does?* The image of his intense blue eyes would not leave her mind. *Who are you, Anakin Skywalker?* she wondered. *Why do I feel something when you are near?* She did not even know what it was that she felt, and this only

added to her confusion. ***You were the most beautiful girl I had ever seen...*** his words still echoed in her mind. Was it more than mere childhood friendship that they had shared? Was there something deeper between them? *He was about to tell me when Palo interrupted...*

“Time for your meds, Padmé.”

Padmé looked up to see one of the duty nurses in her room, a small cup of pills in her hand.

“What meds?” she asked. “I don’t need anything.”

The nurse smiled indulgently. “Come on now,” the nurse coaxed. “We go through this everyday. You know it’s Mr. Corrino’s orders. Now be a good girl and take them,” she said, handing Padmé the cup and a glass of water.

Padmé took the cup and looked at the small yellow pills. *Why am I taking these? Why are they making me?* But she knew that if she did not comply, her garden privileges would be curtailed, and she did not want that. So she swallowed the pills, dutifully, and handed the cup and the glass back to the nurse.

“There now, that wasn’t so bad, was it?” the nurse said with a smile.

“Dinner will be shortly. Why don’t you try to rest until then? It’s been an exciting afternoon for you, I understand. You don’t want to get yourself too worked up.”

Padmé frowned, hating the condescending attitude of the woman. She watched her leave, and then walked over to the window. It overlooked the garden and she looked around to see if her mother and the mysterious visitor who had accompanied her were still there. She was unable to see them, however; and so she assumed that they had left. With a sigh she returned to her pacing, wishing more than anything to have the answers to her questions.

Chapter 24

Chapter 24

Rebel Base-Sixth Planet of the Hoth System

The Rebel Alliance had finally reached the location of what would be its new base. The task that they faced in establishing a base in the remote ice world was enormous, despite the fact that engineers had already been there for several weeks to blast through the permafrost and commence building what would become Echo Base.

“Whoever said Hell was hot has never been to this planet,” Han Solo grumbled as he zipped his parka up under his chin.

Leia smiled. “Well, think of it this way — the chances of the Empire finding us here are as low as the temperature.”

Han smirked. “Yeah, I sure hope so. Look Princess, I don’t know how long I’m gonna be able to hang around here. I need to get Jabba his money, or he’ll be coming after me.”

Leia frowned. “Han, the Alliance needs you. Surely you realize that.”

Han shrugged. “Maybe, but I won’t be much good to anybody with a bounty on my head. Say, maybe your dad can do something about that.”

“My father is trying to keep a low profile just as you are, Han,” Leia reminded him.

“I meant your other dad, the one on Alderaan,” he said.

“Well, I’m not so sure he’ll be in a hurry to do me any favors in the near future, not after the last conversation we had,” Leia told him.

“He can’t blame you for being sore that you were kept in the dark all those years,” Han replied.

“No, especially since my real parents were alive all those years,” Leia replied with a frown. “I just hope in time he’ll come to see my point of view. I love him, Han; he has been the only father I’ve had until just recently. I don’t want to sever that relationship simply because my real father has come into my life.”

“That’s understandable,” Han said. “But considering who your real father is, are you really surprised that his identity was kept from you?”

Leia sighed. “No, I don’t suppose so,” she said. “But what about my mother? If she indeed has been alive all these years, Bail Organa should have told me so. I hate to think of her, all alone all these years,” she said, shaking her head sadly. “It breaks my heart.”

Chewbacca approached Han and Leia and said something to Han to which Han nodded in understanding.

“Chewie says your dad is on the comm. screen,” Han told Leia. “Your real dad.”

“He is?” she exclaimed. “He must have news about Mother! Tell Luke, will you Han? She asked as she ran off to the Falcon.

Han watched her go, smiling to himself as he did so. Then he turned to Chewbacca, who was watching him closely, his arms folded over his chest.

“You could be a little less obvious you know,” Chewie said smugly.

“Mind your own business, fur ball,” Han grumbled as he walked away. Chewbacca merely chuckled as he watched him leave.

Leia sat down at the comm. screen on board the Falcon, smiling when she saw her father’s familiar face. Beside him was a woman who looked to be in her early seventies.

“Father!” Leia said breathlessly. “It’s good to see you!”

“It’s good to see you too, Leia,” Anakin replied. “I’d like you to meet Jobal Naberrie, your grandmother.”

Leia turned to the older woman. “Hello,” she said with a smile. “It’s so nice to meet you!”

Jobal smiled. “And you too, Leia. Your father told me how much you look like your mother; he was certainly right.”

Leia’s smile only grew upon hearing this. “Have you found her?” she said, turning back to Anakin. “Any luck with your search?”

Anakin nodded. “Yes, thanks to your grandmother, I found her,” he told Leia.

“That’s wonderful!” Leia exclaimed, just as Luke joined her at the comm. screen. “Luke, this is our grandmother.”

Luke smiled. “Hi grandmother,” he said.

Jobal smiled. “Nice to meet you, Luke.”

“Father was just telling me how he found Mother,” Leia told her twin. “You did?” Luke said, looking at Anakin.

“Yes, I did,” Anakin replied. ‘She has been in a long term care facility here in Theed,’ he told his children. “She is well, but she doesn’t remember me.”

“We knew that though, right?” Leia said.

“Yes, we did,” Anakin replied. “But it wasn’t easy to face the reality of it.”

Jobal put a hand on Anakin’s arm. “She agreed to talk to you, Anakin,” she reminded him. “That is a big step. And an encouraging one too.”

“Any hope that she will get her memory back?” Luke asked.

“That remains to be seen, Luke,” Anakin replied. “I have a strong suspicion that the administrator of the facility she has been in has been doing something to prevent her from regaining her memory.”

Leia frowned. “Why would he do that?” she asked.

"I don't know yet, Leia," Anakin replied. "But I will find out, I promise you."

"Have you told Mother your suspicions?" Luke asked.

"No, I haven't," Anakin replied. "She doesn't even know who I am yet; I don't want to overwhelm her."

"But she has to know, Father," Leia told him. "You have to start somewhere. Perhaps if she knows who you are it will help her to trust you."

"Perhaps," Anakin acknowledged. "I have something in mind, and I will need her trust to make it work."

"What plan is that?" Luke asked.

"A plan to get her out of that place," Anakin said. "She is stagnating there, and will never regain her memory if she remains there."

Jobal looked at him. "Do you really think that's wise, Anakin? She is getting the care she needs there."

"I have my doubts about that," he replied. 'I have her medical records in my possession now,' he told his children. "I plan to read them thoroughly, and I'm certain that I will find something in them that will confirm my suspicions."

"Let us know what you find," Luke said. "We'll be waiting anxiously to hear from you."

Anakin nodded. "I will," he replied. "Well it's getting late here, so I'll say goodnight to you both. It was good to see you."

"Goodnight Father," Leia said. "Goodnight Grandmother. It was wonderful meeting you."

Jobal smiled. "Good night Leia, Luke. I hope we get to meet very soon."

Anakin closed the transmission.

"They are lovely children," Jobal said. "You must be very proud of them."

"I am," Anakin replied. "Very much so. And I know Padmé will be as well when she meets them."

"Do you plan on telling her about them?" she asked as Anakin stood up.

"I don't know what the best thing to do is," he admitted. "But I think Leia is right; I think if I tell Padmé about our relationship, it will help her to trust me."

Jobal nodded. "I think so too. What about this plan you're talking about? Where would you take her, assuming you can get her out at all?"

"Oh I'll get her out," Anakin told her. "Make no mistake about that. And as for where, I plan to take her to the place that meant more to her than any other, the place where she and I fell in love and were married. The lake retreat."

"You were married there?" Jobal asked. "You mean when Ruwee and I came up there to tell you about the war..."

“We were on our honeymoon,” Anakin told her with a smile. “And you had no idea, did you?”

Jobal shook her head. “Not a clue,” she said.

Anakin laughed. “Well it’s starting to get dark,” he said, looking outside. “I’d better get going if I’m going to find a place to stay.”

Jobal stood up. “You have found a place to stay,” she told him. “Right here in this house.”

“I don’t want to impose upon you, Mrs. Naberrie,” Anakin said.

“Anakin, you are family,” she said. “You are most welcome here. Please, I won’t take no for an answer.”

Anakin smiled. “Thank you,” he said. “You are very kind.”

“Not at all,” she said. “Now come this way, I’ll show you where you can sleep. And in the morning, we can go back to see Padmé if you wish.”

“That would be wonderful,” he said.

Anakin spent the night in the very room he had slept in more than twenty years earlier, when he and Padmé had visited her parents on their way up to the lake retreat. He remembered having a night mare that night about his own mother, and how Padmé had come to him in the dead of night, concerned because she had heard him shouting in his sleep. He recalled how beautiful she looked in her frilly nightgown, with her hair loose about her shoulders, and how difficult it was not to pull her right into the bed with him. He smiled as he remembered her telling him about the fantasy she had about that occasion years later. *So many memories, so many wonderful memories....I will find a way to bring them back to you, Padmé...I promise you.*

Anakin spent many hours poring over Padmé’s medical files. It was tremendously difficult for him to read about the woman he loved described in such cold, clinical terms. It broke his heart to read about how she went for days without speaking sometimes in the early years, about the nightmares that plagued her, about the depression she suffered and her refusal to see any visitors, even her parents. But it was clear that as time passed, she had grown stronger. The nightmares had stopped, she had begun to come out of her shell and interact more with others, and her moods swings had balanced out. And yet, there was no sign that she was beginning to regain her memory. This puzzled Anakin, and he reread sections over and over, taking note of all the anecdotal notes inserted into the records by the attending nurses and physicians. And then he began to notice a pattern.

He noticed that whenever she’d had a nightmare, the next day the dosage of her medication had been increased. During the time when she had been calling his name, the increase had been tremendous. And yet, as the depression and self-isolation began to subside, there had been no decrease in her meds. In fact, it was noted several times that she had questioned the need for them, and had to be coaxed into taking them. This angered Anakin tremendously, and convinced him even more that something dastardly was going on. *I will get to the bottom of this, he vowed. And when I do, Palo Corrino will rue the day he crossed paths with me.*

It was early the next morning when Anakin awoke. The morning was bright, and it gave him hope for what the day might hold in store for him. The thought of seeing his wife again was both exciting and terrifying to him; yesterday she had been happy to see him. What if today she wanted nothing to do with him? What if the small connection that he felt he'd made with her yesterday had evaporated over night? *Then I'll just have to start all over again, if that is what it takes*, he vowed to himself.

"Good morning, Ryoo," Anakin said as he entered the kitchen.

She turned around and smiled at him. "Good morning," she said. "I hope you slept well."

Anakin nodded. "I did," he replied. "I didn't realize how tired I was."

"No wonder, if you walked all the way here from Theed," she said as she took a pan of muffins out of the oven. "Are you hungry?"

"Yes, very," he replied. "Those smell fantastic."

"Well have a seat," she said. "Everything is all set."

"Thank you," he said, overwhelmed by the kindness of his wife's family. He made his way into the dining room and joined Jobal, who was seated at the table enjoying a cup of tea.

"Good morning Anakin," she said with a smile. "How did you sleep?"

"Like a baby," he told her as he sat down. "I suppose a two hour hike will do that to a man."

"Indeed it will," she replied as Ryoo joined them.

"Grandmum tells me you're going to see Aunt Padmé again this morning," Ryoo said.

"Yes," Anakin replied. "I'm quite anxious to see her again."

"You know, I believe I remember you," Ryoo said. "I was only a child when you were here with my aunt, but I remember you nonetheless."

"I wasn't much more than a child myself," Anakin told her with a smile. "Nineteen years old and ready to take on the galaxy."

Ryoo laughed. "Yes, I know that feeling," she said. 'I understand I have two cousins as well,' she said. "Luke and Leia."

Anakin nodded. "That's right," he said, "they are a little younger than you are."

"I'd love to meet them," Ryoo replied.

"Perhaps when Padmé is well again, we can have them come for a visit," suggested Jobal.

"I'm sure they'd enjoy that very much," Anakin said.

Anakin forced himself to be patient as the meal dragged on, each minute that passed seeming like an eternity. He was very anxious to get back to Padmé, to talk to her again. He was tempted to tell her everything he suspected, but he feared this would only serve to frighten her. He needed to take things slowly with her; for to overwhelm her with information would only backfire, of that he was certain.

“Anakin why don’t you go alone to see Padmé?” Jobal suggested. “I’m sure you’d like to spend some time alone with her.”

“Do you think that she will be comfortable alone with me?” he asked. “As far as she knows, she only met me yesterday.”

Jobal nodded. “True. Why don’t I come with you, and then I’ll find some excuse to give you some time alone with her. How does that sound?”

Anakin nodded. “Sounds like a great idea.”

Jobal nodded. “Good. Shall we be off?”

Anakin and Jobal arrived at the facility shortly after Padmé had eaten her breakfast. She was surprised to see visitors so early in the day, but seemed pleased nonetheless. Anakin wasn’t quite sure what to expect, but was relieved that Padmé remembered him, and seemed receptive to talking to him once again.

“I will be back shortly,” Jobal said shortly after they had arrived. “I promised Thea that I would lend her the novel that I’ve just finished.”

Padmé felt a little uneasy when her mother left, but said nothing.

“It’s nice to see you again,” Anakin told her as they sat in the small sitting room adjoining her bedroom. “Our conversation was interrupted yesterday, if you recall.”

Padmé nodded. “Yes, I remember,” she said. “Palo can be quite bossy sometimes I’m afraid.”

Anakin smiled. “Yes, so I’ve noticed.” He paused, unsure where to start. ‘It’s a beautiful day outside,’ he told her. “Would you like to go down to the garden for a bit?”

“I’d love to,” she replied. “But I haven’t had my morning meds yet, and they won’t let me go outside until I’ve had them.”

Anakin felt a surge of anger go through him at her statement. “That isn’t right, Padmé,” he told her. “They cannot withhold privileges from you that way.”

Padmé frowned. “I don’t like it when they do that,” she said quietly.

“Padmé, I want to talk to you about something,” he began. “It’s about the medication you’ve been taking.”

Padmé was curious about what he was going to ask, but just then the duty nurse entered the room.

“Oh, rather early for a visitor,” she commented as she looked at Anakin up and down.

Anakin did not reply, for his eyes were fixed on the cup of pills in the nurse’s hand.

“Time for your morning dose, Padmé,” the nurse said, handing her the cup of pills.

Padmé took them from her.

“I’ll make sure she takes them,” Anakin said to the nurse, standing up to look her in the eye. “Leave us,” he said, using the Force to plant the suggestion in her mind.

The nurse left them at once, closing the door behind her.

Padmé looked down at the pills, and Anakin could sense that she was ambivalent about taking them.

“Have you ever refused them?” he asked.

“What?” she asked, looking up at him.

“The pills,” he said. “Have you ever refused to take them?”

“I’ve tried,” she replied. “But they insist upon it. I have to take in morning and night. They told me that if I stop taking it, the nightmares will come back.”

“Nightmares?” he asked. “What nightmares?”

Padmé sighed, and looked down at the pills. “I used to have nightmares,” she told him. “Or at least that’s what everyone tells me they were. I don’t remember any of the details, I’m afraid. All they’ve told me is that I woke up for several nights shouting, and that I’d been having nightmares. The medication keeps the nightmares away.”

Yes, of course... Anakin thought. *You were starting to remember me, and he made sure those memories were squashed.*

“Have you ever thought about what might happen if you didn’t take the meds?” he asked.

“I know what would happen,” she replied. “Weren’t you listening?”

“Yes, of course I was,” he replied. “I suppose what I’m asking is, do you believe them?”

Padmé frowned. “Of course I believe them,” she replied. “Why wouldn’t i?”

“Because I’ve read through your medical files, Padmé,” he told her. “And I don’t believe them. I don’t believe they are being completely honest with you. I think they are deliberately trying to keep you from getting your memory back.”

Padmé considered what he said, and then stood up, agitated. “Why would they do that?” she asked, the frown not leaving her face. “They are here to help me! You’re wrong; you don’t know what you’re talking about!”

“Padmé, I don’t mean to upset you,” he persisted. “But I have to ask— do you *want* to get your memory back?”

“Of course I do!” she cried. “Why would you ask me such a thing?”

“Have you ever thought that perhaps the nightmares, as they call them, were your mind starting to remember? And that the meds they force you to take prevent those memories from resurfacing?” he asked.

Padmé looked at him, and in her eyes he could see that what he was suggesting was tremendously upsetting to her. But she had to be told, if she was ever to be healed. She had to face the truth, no matter how ugly it may be.

“Who are you?” she asked at last. “Why does any of this concern you? What right do you have to look at my medical files? They are private!”
Anakin stood up. “Do you really want me to tell you who I am?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said. ‘I don’t think you have any right to be here,’ she added, her anger increasing. “I think you have somehow fooled my mother into letting you see me, I don’t know why, but...”

“I’m your husband, Padmé,” he told her. “You and I have been married for more than twenty years.”

Padmé looked at him, a look of utter shock on her face. “My husband?” she asked incredulously. “You’re my husband?”

Anakin nodded, trying to discern what he saw in her eyes. “I want to take you out of here, Padmé,” he told her, walking over to her. “I want to take you somewhere where you won’t be forced to take drugs that you don’t need, where you can be free and safe.”

“I’m safe here,” she replied. “I’ve been safe here for a long time! You say that you are my husband, but where have you been all that time? Why haven’t you been here before yesterday?”

“Until just a few days I believed that you were dead, Padmé!” he told her. “And once I learned the truth, I came looking for you. I love you, Padmé, can’t you see that?”

She shook her head. “Please stop,” she said her eyes filling with tears. “I can’t deal with all this! I don’t know what to believe, what to think!”

“Padmé, I’m telling you the truth!” he exclaimed. “I would never lie to you, never!”

“Is everything alright?” Palo said as he entered the room. He had heard from the duty nurse that Anakin was alone with Padmé.

“This doesn’t concern you,” Anakin said, not looking at him. “This is between my wife and me.”

“Padmé, are you alright?” Palo asked. He spoke to her as though he were speaking to a child.

Padmé did not reply, but merely looked at him, and then back at Anakin. “I... I don’t know,” she replied.

Palo frowned, seeing how distraught she was. He turned to Anakin. “I’ll have to ask you to leave,” he said. “You’ve upset her, can’t you see that?”

Anakin forced himself to contain his anger, knowing that an outburst would only serve to upset Padmé even more. “I am trying to help her,” he said to Palo. “Something you haven’t managed to do in the twenty years she has been in your care.”

“That’s it,” Palo said. ‘You need to leave now,’ he told Anakin. “If you don’t leave peacefully, I’ll have no choice but to call security.”

Anakin smirked. “Security?” he said. “I’d like to see that,” he remarked.

Palo was unnerved by Anakin’s confidence, and decided upon a different tactic. “Padmé, do you wish him to stay? Or go?”

Padmé looked at Anakin, and he could see the confusion and fear in her eyes.

“I am telling you the truth, Padmé,” he told her softly. “I promise you.”

Padmé wasn’t so convinced. “I don’t know what the truth is anymore,” she told him. “Please leave. I... I need to be alone.”

“You heard her,” Palo said smugly. “Unless you want to try and bully her, too.”

Anakin turned to Palo, a look of fury in his eyes. “I will leave,” he said. ‘But this isn’t the end of it, administrator,’ he said. “Once I have the proof I need, I will be back.”

“Proof of what?” Palo asked. “You’re as delusional as half the people in this facility,” he added.

Anakin looked back at Padmé. “Take this,” he said, removing the japor snippet from around his neck. “I gave this to you when we were children. I carved it from a japor snippet. You loved this, Padmé, you wore it always. Please take it.”

Padmé hesitated, and then took the pendant from his hand.

“I’ll leave now, not because of this imbecile, but because I don’t want to upset you anymore,” he said.

She looked up at him. “Thank you,” she said, and then returned her gaze to the pendant in her hand.

Anakin turned to Palo. “Until we meet again, administrator,” he said, and then he left.

Anakin did not stop walking until he was outside. He stopped as the emotions that he had managed to control gave way. Leaning up against the stone wall that encircled the facility, he put a hand over his eyes and wept.

Chapter 25

Chapter 25

Jobal found Anakin standing outside, his face as impassive as the stone wall he leaned against.

“What happened?” Jobal asked simply.

Anakin turned and looked down at her. “I pushed too far,” he said. “I told her too much, and she became very upset.”

Jobal frowned. “I’m sorry,” she said. “Let’s go back home.”

They commenced walking to the speeder, Anakin being sure to keep his hood up to conceal his face. Jobal did not know him very well yet, but she knew enough to realize how upset he was.

“I know how difficult this is,” she told him as he held open the speeder door for her. “I really do. When Padmé’s father and I first told her who were, it was a shock to her. She had some difficulty assimilating the information, but in time she did. And she will accept who you are in time, Anakin. You just need to be patient.”

Anakin shook his head. “I told her far more than just who I am,” he told her. “I told her my suspicions about her medication,” he explained as the speeder lifted off the ground.

“What are you talking about?” Jobal asked. “What is it that you suspect?”

“I read through Padmé’s medical files,” Anakin told her. “And I noticed something quite significant. It seems that Padmé was beginning to regain some of her memory when she said my name. But she stopped saying it once the dosage of her medication was increased. I think those meds she’s on are inhibiting her healing, and preventing her from regaining her memory. And I think this is being done by design.”

Jobal frowned. “But why?” she asked. “Why would Palo do such a thing?”

“I don’t know,” Anakin replied. “For some reason he is hoping to keep Padmé under his control, and so long as she is in this place, he will be able to do just that.”

Jobal considered what Anakin had said. It made sense; but what could Palo’s motivation be?

“What can we do?” she asked at last.

Anakin was silent as he thought for a moment. “I need to prove my suspicions,” he said. “And once I do, I will make that smug self-righteous bastard pay.”

Jobal remained silent. His anger was certainly justified and yet she was unnerved by it all the same. She had known Palo Corrino for many years. It seemed inconceivable to her that he would do something so nefarious. What would be his motivation? Why would he want Padmé to remain in this state of mental limbo that she had existed in for so long? It was almost as

though Palo wanted Padmé to remain helpless and dependent upon him and his care. But why? What did he hope to gain by her reliance upon him? Although at one time there had been a relationship of sorts between he and Padmé, they had been mere children at the time, and the relationship had ended when they had pursued different careers. Since then Palo had never shown any signs of being interested in Padmé in a romantic way. As far as Jobal could tell, Palo was far more interested in art than in women. His own unremarkable foray into the world of art had created in him an obsession with accumulating rare and very expensive pieces of art from all over the galaxy. *That's it...*

"He wants her money," Jobal said at last.

Anakin turned to her, startled out of his own reflections by her voice. "What did you say?"

"That's the reason he'd want to keep Padmé under his thumb," Jobal said. "He wants her money. He's always bragging about his art collection. It's an expensive habit, and no doubt he needs serious funding to maintain it."

Anakin frowned. "You mean you think he's been taking money from her all these years?" he asked angrily.

"It's possible," Jobal replied. 'And it would explain why he wouldn't want her to regain her memory. So long as she remains in a state of confusion, she won't know what he's doing.' Jobal frowned, the possibility of how her daughter had been taken advantage of angering her. "If you're right, then I will make sure he is prosecuted to the full extent of the law," she said. "He won't get away with this."

Anakin nodded, wanting to see justice done just as much as she did. However, he feared that legal action would lead to publicity, and publicity could inadvertently reveal his identity. *I cannot let that happen*, he reflected. *Palpatine would find me, and through me, Padmé and the twins.*

"He will pay for it, make no mistake," Anakin vowed to his mother-in-law. "No matter what, I will make sure of it."

Starship yards of Fondor

Palpatine and his new apprentice, Lord Terreus, watched in silence as the Empire's newest weapon was unveiled. Constructed in secret at the starship yards of Fondor the *Executor* was the first of a new generation of immense warships, a Super-class Star Destroyer. Though the mighty vessel followed the same basic dagger-shaped design of the Imperial-class Star Destroyer, it was much larger, much more powerful than its predecessor. In fact, it was one of the largest, most powerful Imperial vessels ever created.

"Very impressive, my master," Terreus commented. "The Rebel Alliance will not stand a chance against the Imperial Fleet with this craft leading it."

Palpatine nodded. "Yes," he replied, deep in thought. He could not help but think of what a fitting commander Darth Vader would have made for this mighty vessel. In fact, Vader himself had had a hand in the design of the super star destroyer. *Fitting that it will now it will be the instrument of his destruction, his and his children.*

"The command of this vessel is yours, Lord Terreus," Palpatine said at last. "It will be your job to find the Rebel Base. I want you to send out probe droids to every corner of the

galaxy. They must be found, the Skywalker twins must be found. You will not fail me in this, my young apprentice. Not unless you wish to face more punishment.”

Terreus nodded, realizing that the emperor was not one to make idle threats. He had already suffered *punishment* at the hands of his master, and had no desire to go through that again. *I will find the Rebels*, he vowed. *Even if I have to search every planet in the galaxy to do it.*

“The Skywalkers will not evade us for long, Master,” Terreus told Palpatine. “I swear it.”

Palpatine nodded. “Make sure of it, Lord Terreus,” he replied. “It’s their lives, or yours.”

Polis Massa Outpost— Medical Facility— Maternity Ward

Talanis Deece had just entered her office to begin her day when she noticed that there a message coming through on the comm.. She sat down at the screen and activated it. She was surprised to see the face of Anakin Skywalker appear.

“Dr. Deece,” Anakin said. “I’m glad I was able to reach you,” he said.

“Lord Vader,” she replied. “I’m surprised to see you. What can I do for you?” she asked.

“Give me some information, I hope,” Anakin replied. He held up a data disc in his hand. ‘This disc contains my wife’s medical files for the past twenty years,’ he told her. “I need your help to interpret some of the information.”

“You found her then,” Deece replied. “That’s wonderful. How is she?”

“She is well,” Anakin replied. “Although she still has not regained her memory. I have a suspicion that there is a reason for that, and that’s where I need your help.”

“What is it that you suspect?” she asked.

“Padmé has been coerced into taking meds that she doesn’t need,” Anakin told her. “At least, I don’t think she does. I suspect that these meds are preventing her from regaining her memory. Is that possible?”

Deece nodded. “Yes, it certainly is,” she said. ‘It sounds rather diabolical,’ she added with a frown. “Who would do that to her?”

“Someone with his own agenda,” Anakin replied. “I need to prove my theory, though; can you help me do that?”

“Yes, I can try,” she replied. “Why don’t you send me the data and I’ll have a look at it?”

Anakin smiled. “I appreciate this,” he said as he fed the data disc into the computer terminal. “I’m transmitting it now.”

Deece waited for a few seconds for the transmission to be completed, and then downloaded it onto her own data base.

“There’s quite a bit of information here,” Deece told him. “Let me read over this, and I will get back to you.”

“Thank you Doctor,” Anakin replied. “I look forward to hearing from you.”

Planet Naboo

Padmé stared out her window, overlooking the gardens. Her mind was in turmoil as she replayed the unsettling conversation she'd had with Anakin earlier in her mind. There was too much to assimilate at once, it was information overload.

Yet, she could not stop thinking about what he had said. If he was indeed her husband, it would explain why she had felt something undeniable in his presence, why he looked at her the way he did. *Has he truly spent the past twenty years believing me dead?* She wondered. *Why would he? What happened to me that he would think such a thing?*

As startling as this information had been, it was not the most troubling thing that Anakin had disclosed to her. The suggestion that her memory had been deliberately hindered was of far more concern to her. *Why would Palo do such a thing? He's a good person, isn't he? Surely he would not have seen that I was taken care of all these years if he weren't a decent person.*

Padmé sighed, and left the window. She walked over to the bed and looked at the two items on her bedside table: a small paper cup of pills and a silver chain with a stone pendant on it. She could not help but think that somehow the two were inextricably connected. *Was Anakin right? Are those pills the reason I can't remember? If I don't take them, will I remember him? Will I remember why this simple pendant is so important to me?* She picked up the japor snippet and looked at it, running a finger over the grooves that had been painstakingly carved there. *Carved by Anakin, when he was a child. He carved this for me... because he loved me. He loves me still.* Frustration filled her, making her eyes well up with tears.

For so long she had been afraid to remember. Palo had told her how terrifying those nights were for her; how the nightmares had haunted her and made her scream in her sleep. *I don't remember that... is it possible that he is making it up? Is it possible that he is telling me what he wants me to believe?* Certainly if the alternative to taking the medication was unspeakably terrifying dreams, who would refuse them? But what if those dreams were only a way of controlling her, a way of scaring her into submission? *But why would he do that? Why would he want me to live in this miasma of confusion?*

Padmé set the japor snippet down, and picked up the cup of pills next. She looked at them, trying to decide what she ought to do. *If I don't take them, what's the worst that will happen? Isn't the chance of nightmares worth the price of getting my memory back? Getting my life back?* Finally she made her decision.

Picking up the cup of pills, she headed for the fresher. She turned on the faucet to fill a glass with water. And then, she dumped the pills into the sink, and washed them down the drain with the water. Looking up into the mirror, she smiled at herself, feeling certain that she had just taken a step towards independence.

Chapter 26

Chapter 26

Anakin Skywalker had never been a patient man. Waiting to hear from Dr. Deece on Polis Massa was pushing what little patience he had to the limit.

In an effort to make the time pass more quickly, he helped his mother-in-law by doing some home repairs that needed attending to. Anakin had always enjoyed fixing things, and had always found it helped him sort through things in his mind.

"This dishwasher has been leaking for almost three weeks," Jobal told him. "I've had a repair droid out here twice already, but they never seem to get it right. Perhaps it's time for a new one," she remarked.

"Let me have a look," Anakin said, rolling up his sleeves. "I'm pretty good at fixing things."

Anakin spent the next two hours taking apart the unit, while his mother-in-law watched anxiously. She had begun to regret letting him have a go at it when he emerged from under the unit. "Found the problem," he said, digging through the tool box Jobal had provided him with.

"You did?" she asked hopefully.

Anakin nodded. "Yes, it won't take a minute to fix," he said, and then disappeared under the unit once more. After a few moments, Jobal watched in amazement as he reassembled the unit in remarkably short order.

"Give it a try," he suggested as he put the tools he'd used back in the box. He watched with his arms folded over his chest as Jobal started up the machine.

"Normally there is a puddle on the floor within the first few minutes of the wash cycle," she told him, watching the spot on the floor, expecting to see an accumulation of water begin to form at any moment.

"Looks like that did it," she said, looking up at him with a smile. "Thank you."

Anakin smiled as he started rolling down his sleeves. "Not at all," he said. "It's the least I can do. You've been very kind to me, and I appreciate it more than I can say."

Jobal smiled. "You're family, Anakin," she told him. "Families help one another out."

Anakin nodded. "The only family I ever had was my mother," he told her. "When she died, I had no one really, at least until I married Padmé."

"And you will have her back, Anakin, I'm sure of it," Jobal replied. "We all will."

"I hope so," he said. "Now, is there anything else you need fixed around here?" he asked.

"Well, since you asked, there are a couple of things," she replied.

Anakin smiled. "Lead the way."

Padmé had ventured out to the quadrangle, the bright sunshine proving to be too tempting to resist. The fact that she had not taken her meds made her feel slightly guilty, and she half expected Palo or a nurse to show up at any minute to order her back to her room. She remembered Anakin's comment when she had told him how they would not allow her to leave her room until she had taken her meds. He had thought it unfair, and Padmé was starting to think that he was right.

Padmé put her hand in the pocket of her trousers and felt the japor snippet she had brought with her. She traced the grooves with her finger, the feel of the smooth wood somehow comforting to her. It was a connection to her past, and that brought her some comfort, despite the fact that she did not remember the day Anakin had given it to her. *But I want to remember that day*, she thought fervently. *I want to remember the day we met, the day we were married...* A thought struck her suddenly, and it only served to add to her anxiety. *Do we have children?* The thought that she possibly had children somewhere in the galaxy, children that she knew nothing of, not even their names, saddened her greatly; but made her desire to remember even greater. *How many doses will I need to miss before I know if there has been a change?* She wondered. She almost wished for it to be night time so that she could test Anakin's theory. *But it's too soon — one dose will not make a difference.*

"Padmé? Are you alright?"

Padmé looked around to see Palo.

"I'm fine," she said.

"Are you sure?" he asked, speaking in gentle tones.

"Yes, of course I'm sure," she replied, "why wouldn't I be?"

"Well, you've had a lot of upheaval the past few days," he said. "And I understand you resisted your meds again last night."

Padmé turned away from him, lest her face give away her thoughts. "I don't need them," she said.

"Padmé you know you do," he said in a patronizing tone. "You know what will happen if you don't take them."

"I don't know that for sure," she said, surprising herself with her nerve. *Is this what the drugs do to me? Make me a meek, mindless zombie that cannot think for herself?* She couldn't deny that even missing one dose had greatly clarified her mind, sharpened her wits. Even one missed dose had done that— *what would happen if I stop taking them altogether?*

"Padmé? Are you listening to me?"

Padmé turned to look at him. "I wasn't, no," she admitted.

Palo looked at her with a little smile. "See? You aren't right, are you? Perhaps you need some rest," he said, moving to take her by the arm. Padmé moved away from him.

"I said I'm fine," she told him.

Palo looked at her, looked at her eyes. They were clearer than they had been in a long time. Her attitude was different too, and he was certain he knew why.

“You didn’t take your meds, did you?” he said.

Padmé frowned. “Would I be here if I hadn’t?” she replied.

“I’m not sure, Padmé,” he said. “You’re not acting like yourself this morning. You’re rather confrontational, and I’m not sure why that is, but I have a feeling it has something to do with this man who claims to be your husband.”

“How do you know he isn’t my husband?” Padmé replied.

“What kind of a husband would he be, Padmé?” he asked her in that same condescending tone that was beginning to get on her nerves. ‘I found you wandering the streets of Theed. If he truly were your husband, why would you have been in such a destitute state? You’ve been here for close to twenty years now,’ he reminded her. “Where has he been for twenty years, Padmé? Have you considered that?”

“He told me that he thought I was dead,” she told him. “And that he had just found out mere days ago that I was alive.”

“I see,” Palo said, nodding his head. “Does that make sense to you, Padmé? Really?”

“I don’t know,” she admitted, “all I know is that he has told me more about the person I was in the short time I’ve spent with him than anyone else has in the twenty years I’ve been in this place.”

Palo frowned. “I don’t think I like what you’re implying Padmé,” he said. ‘You sound as though you don’t appreciate all that we have done for you here,’ he said in an injured tone. “We’ve done all we can to help you, surely you know that.”

Padmé did not reply, his words upsetting her. Yes, she was certainly grateful to Palo for having found her, for giving her a place to live, for caring for her; but how must that gratitude extend? Did it make her beholden to Palo for the rest of her life, precluding any chance of exerting any level of independence? Did it mean that she ought to believe him and trust him implicitly, even when her instincts were beginning to tell her not to?

“I appreciate everything you’ve done for me,” Padmé said, realizing she ought to tread carefully lest she give him too much reason to suspect her of duplicity. “Surely you know that. But you can’t blame me for wanting to learn everything I can about my past, Palo. Put yourself in my place, wouldn’t you want to know?”

“Yes, of course I would,” he replied. “Anyone would. But I just don’t want to see you hurt by someone who may not have your best interests at heart, that’s all.”

Padmé made no reply, for in her mind she was considering the irony of his words. Anakin had said virtually the same thing about Palo; who was she to believe? Who was she to trust? Her mind was not yet clear enough to know, but her instincts, which had always served her well, left little room for doubt. They told her who she ought to place her trust in. And it was not the man standing before her.

“That’s very sweet,” she told him, giving him a dazzling smile. “I am very lucky to have you as my champion, Palo.”

Palo was sufficiently placated by her reply, and let the matter go for the moment. In his mind, though, he made a mental note to keep a close eye on Padmé, and to be sure that a certain Anakin Skywalker was not permitted within the walls of the facility which housed her.

"I have a meeting with my bankers," he told her, glancing at his wrist chrono. "So I need to leave. I do wish you would take some rest, Padmé," he said. "I'm concerned about you."

"I will, later," she told him. "I promise."

"Very well," he said, giving her a light pack on the cheek. "I'll check in on you later."

Padmé watched him leave, the smile pasted on her face until he was out of sight. When she was certain that he was gone, she pulled the japor snippet from her pocket and looked at it closely, determined to use it to unlock the mystery that was her life.

"Doctor Deese, I've been anxious to hear from you," Anakin said as he sat before the comm. screen. It had been several hours since he had sent her Padmé's medical files. The hours had passed by slowly as he waited for her response.

"I'm sorry for the delay," she replied. "I had a few babies to deliver," she told him with a smile.

"Of course," Anakin replied. "I should have realized that. What can you tell me? Were you able to make any sense of my wife's unusual condition?"

"Yes, I have," she said. "You were right," she told him. "The medication, Tharandon, is no longer used to treat her type of condition because the side effects of long term use far outweigh any positive benefits."

"What side effects?" Anakin asked, the anger slowly building within him.

"If used for prolonged periods, Tharandon can be debilitating and can cause long term memory loss which may in some cases be irreversible." She paused, unnerved by the look in Anakin's eyes, by his silence. He wanted to know the truth, but was he truly prepared for it? She pressed on. "No reputable doctor would even prescribe Tharandon any more," she continued. "And I worry that if she does not stop taking these medications immediately she will eventually become bedridden and unresponsive over time." She stopped again. "You need to get your wife out of that facility, and immediately. That is my advice to you."

Anakin nodded, trying to wrap his mind around all that the physician had just told him. Inside of him, his rage was building, churning, smoldering like the molten rivers of fire that had all but destroyed him two decades earlier. He had not felt rage like this in a very long time, and it filled him with a darkness that he thought he had long since abandoned.

"Would you be willing to put this report into writing?" he asked at last.

"I already have," she said, holding up a datadisc. "I took the liberty of writing up a report for you, figuring you would need proof of your allegations of malpractice. Here it is, the proof you need," she said, feeding the datadisc into her computer. "I wish you luck with your quest. If there is anything else I can do for you, please do not hesitate to ask."

"I will," Anakin replied. "And I thank you."

"I'm glad I could help," she replied. "I hope you make the people who did this to her pay."

“Oh they will pay, make no mistake,” Anakin assured her, his fists clenched tightly as they rested on the armrests of the chair. “They will pay.”

Chapter 27

Chapter 27

No reputable doctor would even prescribe Tharandon any more... I worry that if she does not stop taking these medications immediately she will eventually become bedridden and unresponsive over time... You need to get your wife out of that facility, and immediately. That is my advice to you..

Dr. Deece's words still echoed in his mind as he sat in the darkening room. The anger he felt crackled around him, filling the room with a dark energy. From the other side of the room, Anakin heard the sound of glass breaking as one by one the fine crystal wine goblets exploded in a shower of tiny shards, shattered by the potent fury that filled the room. Suddenly the glass cabinet door flew off of the hinges, burst in midair and then fell to the floor in a pile of jagged shards. The sound shook Anakin from his dark musings, and he turned around.

"Damn it," he muttered as he saw the destruction his anger had wrought. He walked over to the cabinet and bent down to start cleaning up the mess.

"Anakin? Is everything alright?"

Anakin looked up to see Ryoo standing in the room, cutting his hand in the process. He uttered a Huttese curse that would have made his mother's hair curl as blood poured forth from his hand.

"What happened?" Ryoo called as she ran to the kitchen to fetch a cloth.

Anakin sighed as he looked down at his injured hand. *How do I explain this?* he wondered in frustration.

"I... sort of lost my temper," he told her as she returned and commenced wrapping the cloth around his wound tightly.

She looked up at him. "I don't understand," she said, putting pressure on the cut.

"I heard back from the doctor at Polis Massa," he told her.

"The one who you sent Aunt Padmé's medical files to?" she asked.

Anakin nodded as he watched her check his cut. "She confirmed my suspicions, Ryoo. Padmé has been given meds to inhibit her ability to remember her past."

"I can't believe it," Ryoo replied, shaking her head in disbelief. "Who would do such a thing? And why?"

"Palo is behind this, I'm sure of it," Anakin replied.

"But he isn't a doctor," Ryoo told him. "How can he prescribe medication?"

"He isn't," Anakin agreed. "But obviously someone in his employ is, someone he has a great deal of influence over, someone who is as anxious to get their hands on Padmé's money as he is."

"You think that is his motivation?" Ryoo asked.

"Yes, I do," Anakin replied. "According to your grandmother, he has a rather expensive habit he needs to fund."

"Oh yes, his precious art collection," Ryoo commented sourly. "He thinks he's some big artiste. He makes me sick."

"He's not going to get away with this, Ryoo," he told her. "I promise you that."

"What happened in here!?" Jobal asked as she stood in the doorway. She looked at all the broken glass, and then at Anakin's bandaged hand.

"Anakin? What happened?"

"I'm sorry," he said, feeling embarrassed about all the damage he had caused. "I... just lost control of my anger. I will replace everything, I promise."

"Oh I don't care about that," Jobal said, with a dismissive wave of her hand. "I'm more concerned about you. What caused you to become so angry?"

"I was right, Mrs. Naberrie," he told her as Ryoo unwrapped his hand to examine the wound. "The doctor on Polis Massa confirmed my suspicions."

Jobal's eyes widened. "You mean... the medication Padmé has been taken is what is responsible for her not regaining her memory?"

Anakin nodded. "Not only that, she told me that it could also lead to long term, debilitating side effects. She advised me to get Padmé out of there as soon as possible, and I mean to do just that."

Jobal shook her head, and suddenly looked very frail. "I should have taken Padmé out of that place years ago," she said quietly as she made her way over to the sofa on the other side of the room. "I honestly thought it was the best thing for her, that she would receive the care she needed. If only I'd questioned what was going on... if only I'd stopped to think..."

"Don't do this, Grandma," Ryoo said firmly. "Don't you dare blame yourself for what has happened. You are in no condition to care for someone who needs full time care, and I'm not here all day what with school and my job. We've never had any reason to question that anything was amiss, not until now."

"Ryoo is right," Anakin said, walking over to sit down beside his mother-in-law. "You did what you thought was best for her, as any mother would. Palo is far too clever for anyone to suspect him of anything nefarious."

"But you did," Jobal pointed out. "You did upon your first meeting."

"I'm a Jedi," he reminded her. "We have the ability to tell when someone is hiding something." He looked over at the broken glass across the room. "Unfortunately that power can also cause destruction on occasion," he added sheepishly.

“You did that with your...Jedi powers?” Ryoo asked in amazement.

Anakin nodded.

“I wonder if Palo has any idea who he’s messing with,” Ryoo said with a smile.

“I doubt it,” Anakin replied. “But he will find out soon enough.”

“What do you plan to do?” Jobal asked.

Anakin considered her question as he stood up and walked across the room. “First I’m going to clean up this mess,” he said. “And then I’m going to go for a long, brisk walk to clear my head. I need to put together a plan, one that will not leave any chance of that son-of-a-bitch getting away with this. I’m too angry right now to think clearly, that much is clear,” he said, looking down at the pile of shattered glass at his feet.

“Perhaps a good night sleep will help too,” Jobal suggested. “That is if any of us will be able to sleep knowing what we now do.”

“I won’t sleep well until I get Padmé out of that place,” Anakin said. “I have half a mind to go down there right now and bring her here, but I know that she would only get upset if I did that.”

“No, that wouldn’t be the best solution,” Ryoo agreed. “Besides, the security around that place is too tight, even for a Jedi.”

Anakin lifted an eyebrow. “Well, I beg to differ, but that’s neither here nor there right now. I must have Padmé’s trust in order for this to work. If I have to take her out of there under duress, then it will all be in vain.”

“I agree,” Jobal said. “I will go see her in the morning, feel her out. Perhaps she will have calmed down enough to agree to see you again.”

“I hope so,” Anakin replied. And then, with Ryoo’s help, he started to clean up the mess he’d made.

Padmé had taken her dinner in her room, not wishing the company of anyone that evening. She was certain that someone would notice the change in her, and it would result in some new way of controlling her. So she decided it would be best to keep a low profile, and avoid the other patients as well as staff as much as possible.

Leaving the fresher, Padmé entered her bedroom to find the duty nurse standing beside her bed, holding the japor snippet in her hand.

“What are you doing touching my things?” Padmé demanded, rushing over and snatching it from the woman’s hand. “Have you ever heard of something called privacy?”

“Now now,” the nurse replied, trying to calm her down. “I was just looking at it. I have never seen anything like that before. You haven’t always had it, have you?”

Padmé did not reply at first, for she was certain that the nurse was trying to trap her somehow. “My mother gave it to me just the other day,” she lied.

“I see,” the nurse said. “It’s quite an interesting design. Does it mean anything?”

Padmé looked down at the snippet, feeling certain that it did mean something, but not remembering what it was. “I don’t know that it means anything at all,” she said quietly, closing her hand around the pendant. “It’s just a design, that’s all.”

The nurse nodded. “Well you know what time it is,” she said, picking up the paper cup of pills from the bedside table where she had set them. She held them out to Padmé. “Here you go, hon.”

Padmé took the pills from the nurse and popped them in her mouth at once.

“Good girl,” the nurse said with a smile. “You get to bed now, understand?”

Padmé nodded and watched as the nurse left. When she heard her door lock, she immediately spit the pills into her hand. She returned to the fresher and flushed them away, and then rinsed her mouth out with water. Then she took the japor snippet and slipped the chain around her neck. Somehow it was comforting to wear it, even though she didn’t quite know why.

Padmé returned to her bedroom and turned off the light. Climbing into bed, she felt a sense of anxious anticipation, hoping in a fearful way that the two missed doses of meds would be enough to herald a dream that very night. She closed her eyes, wiling herself to go to sleep, the japor snippet pressed against her skin.

Chapter 28

Chapter 28

Anakin slept very little that night. He had read the report that Dr. Deece had sent, and it had only added to the already tremendous rage that he felt trying to consume him. In her report, Deece had indicated that the medication was actually redundant for the prevention of nightmares, so its primary use was and probably always had been for memory loss. She suggested that Padmé was more than likely regaining her memory through her nightmares, and that the treatment with Tharandon was designed to stop that from happening.

Designed to stop that from happening... Had the use of the questionable drug been a mistake, or an error in judgment, it would not have been quite so horrendous to contemplate. But the fact that she had been given the drug in order to repress her memories, and that it had been their intention to repress those memories, made Anakin's blood boil. He honestly did not know what would happen when he came face to face with Palo again. It had not been that long since he had been Darth Vader, both in body and in soul; much of the darkness that had defined Vader still lurked within Anakin Skywalker. The shattered glass in his mother-in-law's parlor was proof of that. *I will not let the Darkness win again. I will not let it claim my soul; never again... if only my children were here, they would keep me from its grasp...*

The thought of Luke and Leia only added to Anakin's melancholy mood. It seemed no sooner had he found his children then they were gone from his life once again. *I need them*, he realized, *and so does Padmé*.

Anakin sat up in bed, having made up his mind. He got up, not bothering to put on his tunic and left the small room.

Just seeing his daughter's face again put a smile on his face.

"Hi," Anakin said. "It's good to see you."

Leia smiled at him. "It's good to see you too. I've missed you."

"I miss you too, both of you," Anakin replied. "How is everything going?"

"Well, we've established a new base," she told him, sensing that there was a great deal troubling her father. "Han is complaining about the cold constantly," she told him with a smirk.

Anakin nodded. "I don't blame him. How is your brother? Has he left for Dagobah yet?"

"No," she replied. "He felt he needed to stay here for a few weeks to help set things up before he left. Obi-Wan has been working with both of us, though, so his training hasn't been neglected."

"That's good," Anakin replied.

"Why don't you tell me what's bothering you?" Leia suggested. "I can tell something is."

Anakin was surprised by his daughter's ability to sense his feelings from so great a distance.

"I don't suppose there's any sense denying that," he told her.

Leia just smiled and shook her head.

"I've learned something about your mother's situation," he told her. "Something truly reprehensible"

Leia's smile soon disappeared. "What have you learned?" she asked.

"I've learned that those who were entrusted with her care have been giving her drugs all these years that repress memory," he told her. "That they have done so deliberately in order to take advantage of her and steal her money."

"What!?" Leia cried. "You mean all these years she need not have lived as a dependent in that place? That she could have regained her memory by now were it not for those drugs?"

Anakin nodded. "Yes," he told her. "That's exactly what I mean, Leia. And I promise you that I will make those responsible pay for what they have done."

Leia frowned, concerned not only by her father's disclosure, but also by the tremendous anger she sensed in him. She could see it in his eyes, hear it in his voice; and it frightened her.

"Father, please don't let this turn you back to the Dark Side," she told him. "I am as angry as you are, but you mustn't let it destroy you."

"I am fighting it, Leia," Anakin told her. "I truly am. That's part of the reason I contacted you— somehow just seeing you and hearing your voice helps me to do so."

Leia smiled, moved by his admission. "I love you too, Father," she told him.

Anakin smiled. "You are remarkable, do you know that?" he said.

"I'm my father's child," she reminded him.

Anakin nodded. "Yes, no doubt of that. Well I should try to get some sleep; I'm hoping to see your mother in the morning."

"Okay," she said. "I'll be sure to tell Luke you said hi."

"Thank you," he said. 'I love you, Leia,' he added. "I'll see you soon."

"Goodnight, Father," Leia replied. "Sweet dreams."

Leia closed the transmission and sat in the Falcon's hold alone for a few moments. *My mother has been alive all these years, and Bail Organa knew it... so why didn't he tell me? Why did he lie about her?* The thought that her mother had spent twenty years living in drug induced isolation was horrific. It saddened Leia, but more than that, it angered her. She shared her father's anger and hatred for those responsible for doing this, but she also felt anger towards the man who she had grown up believing was her father, Bail Organa. Yes, he had raised her, loved her, provided for her; but he had also lied to her, and kept the truth of her real mother's existence from her. While that in itself was enough to be resentful, the fact that Padmé had been alone, isolated and taken advantage of all those years made it unforgivable.

The thought of changing her name had crossed Leia's mind more than once in the past few weeks, but given this latest discovery, it made the idea even more appealing.

"Everything okay?" Han asked as he poked his head into the hold.

Leia looked up at him. "No, not at all," she said as she stood up. "Do you know where Luke is? I have something I need to tell him."

Naboo— The Next Morning

Padmé was disappointed when she awoke the next morning. She had not experienced one remarkable dream all night, and had begun to wonder if her theory had been erroneous. Perhaps there was no connection at all between the meds and her memories, perhaps it had all been foolish to even consider she could get her memory back simply by stopping her meds. *No, I won't give up*, she told herself. *It's too soon... give it more time... there's already been a change, you've felt it yourself.*

She got up out of bed and walked over to her window. The morning was grey, with a promise of rain in the air. *No garden today, likely*, she realized glumly. The day seemed to stretch out in front of her, unbearable long without a diversion to occupy her. *I've never felt like that before*, she realized as she left the window, realizing that she had more proof that the cessation of meds were indeed affecting her.

"Good morning," the duty nurse announced as she opened the door without as much as a knock.

Padmé turned around, annoyed by her lack of consideration.

"Time for meds," she said.

"I haven't even had breakfast yet," Padmé protested.

The nurse shrugged her shoulders. "I'm just following orders, Padmé," she said. "I guess you've been a bit off lately, and Mr. Corrino wants to make sure you're okay."

A likely story, Padmé thought. She held out her hand and took the pills. There were three now where just last night there had been but two.

"Will you be coming down for breakfast? Or should I have it sent up here?" the nurse asked.

"Send it up here," Padmé replied. "I'm not up to company this morning."

"Okay," the nurse replied. She stood and watched Padmé. "I'm waiting," she said.

"For what?" Padmé asked.

"You know very well what," the nurse replied. "Now come on, let's not get into this again."

"Oh okay," Padmé said, pretending to comply. She put them in her mouth.

"Now swallow," the nurse said, all trace of humor gone from her eyes.

Padmé pointed to the fresher, indicating that she needed a drink.

"I can get that for you," the nurse said, realizing what Padmé was trying to do. She went into the fresher to get a glass of water and was gone mere seconds before she returned.

"There you go," she said, handing Padmé the glass.

Padmé nodded, and then took the glass and drank down the water.

"Good job," the nurse replied, smiling once again. "I'll send breakfast up at once."

"Thanks," Padmé replied. As soon as the door closed, she spit the pills, which she had hidden under her tongue, into her hand. She stared at them, starting to loathe the sight of them. 'You won't win this time, Palo,' she said, closing her hand around the small tablets. "It's time for me to take my life back."

It was an hour later and Padmé had just finished getting dressed when she heard a knock on her door. She realized it wasn't the duty nurse, since she never knocked.

"Who is it?" she asked.

"It's me, Padmé; your mom."

Padmé opened the door at once to let in her mother.

"How are you today?" Jobal asked as she embraced her daughter.

"I'm fine, thanks," Padmé replied. "How are you? You look worried."

Jobal was struck by the change in her daughter. Padmé looked far more alert, far more lucid than she had looked in years, and Jobal couldn't help but wonder if she had started to believe Anakin about the meds. *Speaking of Anakin...*

"I understand you were upset with Anakin yesterday," Jobal began as the two women walked into the sitting room.

Padmé looked at her mother. "He told you that?" she asked.

Jobal nodded as she took a seat. "Yes he did," she replied. "He is very concerned, Padmé, very worried about you. He loves you a great deal."

Padmé sat down with her mother. "I know he does," she said quietly. "I only wish I could remember him, remember my life with him."

Jobal remained silent, not feeling it was her place to tell Padmé what Anakin had learned. "He's here you know," she said at last.

Padmé looked up at her mother. "Anakin is?"

"Yes," Jobal replied. "He doesn't want to upset you though, that's why he didn't come up."

Jobal watched her daughter as she tried to decide what she wanted. She could see the conflict in Padmé's eyes.

"Should I go and get him?" Jobal asked.

"I...I don't know," Padmé replied, standing up and walking across the room. "Part of me wants to see him, part of me is afraid to."

"Afraid?" Jobal asked. "Why would you be afraid?"

"Because of the things he tells me," she replied. "He thinks that the meds I'm taking have been responsible for me not getting my memory back. If that's true..."

"If it's true, it isn't Anakin's doing," Jobal replied. "It just means that he is the first one to tell you the truth. I've spent a lot of time with him, Padmé; he's a good man, an honorable man, and he loves you beyond words. You can trust him, Padmé. I promise you that."

Padmé knew she could trust him, she had sensed that from the moment she had first met him. It was almost as though there was a connection there that transcended conscious memory or thought; and if that were true, then she needed to rediscover that connection.

"Yes, I do want to see him," Padmé told her mother at last. "Please show him up."

Anakin paced up and down in the corridor on the main floor. It had taken every ounce of restraint he possessed not to race upstairs and find Padmé. He knew that she would be upset if he pushed too hard, and that was the last thing he wanted to do. Yet it was very difficult for him to stay away from her, to remain patient. Finally he saw his mother-in-law approaching him.

"Well?" he asked her simply.

"She wants to see you," Jobal told him.

Anakin smiled with relief. "She does?" he asked.

"Yes, yes of course," Jobal laughed. "Now come along," she said, taking his hand.

They had not even reached the end of the corridor when two armed guards appeared and blocked their way.

"I'm afraid you're not permitted to enter the residence," one of the guards told Anakin.

Anakin frowned. "You can't be serious," he said.

"We're very serious, sir," the second guard replied. "We have strict orders from Mr. Corrino not to allow you inside."

Anakin exchanged a look with Jobal as he decided what course of action he ought to take. "Go up," he told her; not wishing her to be involved in what he was sure would end up in aggressive negotiations.

"What about you?" she asked. "This is preposterous!"

"It is, but don't worry," he said to her. "I'll talk them into it."

Jobal frowned, knowing that 'talk' was merely a euphemism for something a little less subtle. Still, she reasoned that nothing was going to keep Anakin from seeing Padmé, so she might as well accept his unconventional methods.

Jobal continued down the corridor and stepped onto the lift, watching Anakin as long as she could before the doors closed.

“Now, I strongly suggest that you reconsider letting me pass,” Anakin said to the guards, doing his utmost to remain calm. “Otherwise, I may have to injure you.”

The guards looked at one another with a smirk. “Yeah, sure pal,” one of them said. “Two of us against one of you, and you don’t even have a weapon...”

“I don’t need a weapon,” Anakin said, sending the two guards flying across the corridor. They slammed up against the wall and immediately jumped to their feet and pointed their blasters at Anakin.

“I don’t think so,” Anakin said, yanking the blasters from the men’s hands with the Force. He grabbed the weapons easily and turned them on the astonished guards. ‘Move,’ he told them. “Into the lift.”

The guards did as they were told, realizing that they were no match for him. Once they were inside the lift, Anakin closed the door and used the Force to fuse the controls, making prisoners of the guards within the small lift. He then headed for the stairs and took them three at a time until he reached the second floor. Walking down the corridor, he found a laundry shoot and dumped the blasters, and then proceeded to Padmé’s door.

“Anakin!” Jobal exclaimed when she opened the door for him. “What happened? How did you get past those guards?”

Anakin shrugged. “Quite easily actually,” he said. “But I’m afraid the lift will be out of order for a little while,” he added with a smile. He looked over Jobal’s shoulder to see Padmé looking at him.

“Hi,” he said with a smile.

“Hi,” she replied, “what’s going on?”

Anakin walked into the room. “It seems I’m not wanted here,” he told her. “No doubt Palo left orders for them not to let me up to see you.”

Padmé frowned. “He shouldn’t have done that,” she said.

“He doesn’t like me,” Anakin replied. ‘Not that I care,’ he hastened to add. “The feelings are more than mutual.”

“You know he’ll be up here as soon as he finds out you’re here,” Jobal told him.

Anakin nodded. “Yes, I know,” he said, looking at her. “In fact, I’m counting on it.”

“I don’t understand,” Padmé said. “Why would you want to force a confrontation with him?”

“I have something to discuss with Administrator Corrino,” Anakin replied. “Something you need to know, Padmé.”

Padmé looked from Anakin to her mother and then back to him again. “What?” she asked. “What is going on?”

“Sit down, Padmé,” Anakin said, sitting down on the sofa. Padmé sat beside him, her anxiety level rising.

Anakin looked at her, sensing in her a new level of awareness, a higher degree of lucidity. He noticed something else; she was wearing the japor snippet.

“Do you remember what I told you yesterday, Padmé,” he asked her. “About your medical records?”

Padmé nodded. “Yes, you told me that you’d read them.”

“Yes,” Anakin said. “I know you were upset with me for doing that, but I did it in order to help you. I would never do anything to deliberately upset you, Padmé; I hope you realize that.”

Padmé did not know what to say in response, so she did not say anything, and merely waited for him to continue.

“I also told you about what I suspected about the medication you’ve been taking,” Anakin continued. “I know this isn’t an easy thing for you to think about, Padmé, but you need to know the truth.”

“And what is the truth, Anakin?” she asked.

“The truth is, I was right,” he told her. “I consulted with a physician, who corroborated what I thought. Tharandon, the medication that you’ve been taking for twenty years, is responsible for your memory loss.”

“You know this for certain?” she asked.

Anakin nodded. He pulled a datadisc from within his cloak. “I have the doctor’s report right here,” he said. “The proof I needed.”

Padmé was silent as she digested this information. She felt a tumult of conflicting emotions churning within her as she considered the implications of this news.

Part of her felt tremendous anger, outrage at what had been done to her, at how she had been abused for so long. Part of her felt confused; why would Palo want her memories repressed? What purpose would it serve? What advantage would it give him?

Yet despite these negative emotions, there was also a part of her that took hope from this news. She had already noticed changes in her since she had stopped taking the meds; and that was only with three missed doses. How long would it be before she began to regain her memory?

“I haven’t taken the meds in more than twenty-four hours,” she told him at last. “And I’ve already noticed a difference.”

“How did you manage that?” Jobal asked. “Those nurses are like drill sergeants from what I’ve seen.”

“I hid them,” Padmé told her mother. “Under my tongue. I flushed them down the toilet, washed them down the sink, whatever it took.”

Anakin smiled. *So she did believe me...* “And you’ve noticed a change,” Anakin said.

Padmé looked at him and nodded. “Yes, I have,” she replied. ‘I seem to be thinking more clearly,’ she told him. “I’ve started to question things, where before I would just accept

whatever they told me.”

“You’ve started back, Padmé,” Anakin told her. “But we have to get you out of here in order for you to fully recover. So long as you’re in here, you will have to fight for every step you take. I won’t let them do this to you any more. I’ll break you out of here myself if I have to.”

“I’m afraid that isn’t likely to happen.”

Anakin and Padmé turned to see Palo standing in the doorway. Anakin felt the rage he thought he’d mastered filling him again as he faced his adversary, and stood up.

“And who is going to stop me,” Anakin asked as he walked towards him. “You, administrator?” he asked, his voice full of contempt.

Palo smirked. “You must be pretty pleased with yourself for the way you dispatched my guards,” he said. “But I assure you, that is not the extent of my resources. I am a powerful man, Skywalker; with many powerful connections.”

“No doubt purchased with my wife’s money,” Anakin commented. He saw the flicker of fear in Palo’s eyes, and realized that he had struck a nerve. ‘I understand you have quite an impressive art collection, administrator,’ he continued. “Amazing how you were able to keep up such an expensive hobby on a health care provider’s salary.”

“I don’t think I like what you’re implying,” Palo said, doing his best to keep his fear out of his voice. “My personal finances are none of your concern.”

“I don’t give a damn about the money,” Anakin growled, stepping closer to Palo. “That is inconsequential compared to the blatant abuse Padmé has endured in this facility for the past twenty years.”

“Abuse?” Palo echoed. “You really have some nerve saying that to me! The long lost husband who neglects his wife for twenty years and then just shows up out of no where! If anyone is guilty of abuse here, it’s you, Skywalker!”

That was all it took to make Anakin lose the tenuous control he had over his temper. He lifted a hand and used the Force to shove Palo across the room.

“Anakin, please!” Padmé cried as Anakin advanced on Palo who was struggling to his feet.

“He’s got this coming, Padmé,” Anakin told her without turning away from his prey.

“Padmé is right, Anakin,” Jobal said. “Violence won’t solve anything.”

Palo stood up shakily, his pride more injured than his body at this point.

“I’ll have you arrested for this assault, Skywalker,” he whined as he rubbed his back gingerly. “I’ll...”

“You’ll be lucky to see the light of day again after I have you charged with practicing medicine without a license, and the doctor you have on your payroll charged with malpractice,” Anakin interjected. He held up the data disc. “I have all the proof I need to see that this place is shut down and you, administrator, are sent to prison for the rest of your life.”

“What *proof* do you think you have of anything?” Palo retorted, trying to hide the fear he felt swelling within him. But his efforts were in vain, for Anakin sensed it at once, and moved in for the kill.

“Records indicating you have coerced my wife into taking a dangerous drug for two decades,” Anakin replied. “A drug that has not only repressed her memory, but has made her dependent upon you and this facility for twenty years. And then there is Padmé’s financial records,” he added. He had not seen her financial records, but he guessed that once he did, they would reveal a great deal. And he was right; the mention of the records created a fresh wave of fear in Palo. Anakin smiled.

“Padmé gave me power of attorney years ago,” Palo stated. “I have merely been....making investments for her.”

“Is that what you’d call stealing from a woman who wouldn’t know what was going on?” Jobal spoke up. “And to think we all trusted you! My husband went to his grave thinking his little girl was in good hands, and all this time you were not only taking advantage of her condition, but you were exacerbating it! How could you!?”

“Please,” Palo replied. “Neither you nor your husband ever offered to take care of Padmé,” he retorted. “If it weren’t for me she would have ended up as a prostitute on the streets of Theed, not that her dear *husband* here would have cared.”

Palo didn’t even see Anakin coming, his attack was so swift. He doubled over as Anakin’s fist connected with his midriff. Sputtering and coughing, Palo struggled to face his attacker and did so just in time to receive a second blow, this time to his jaw. He felt blood fill his mouth as he struggled to keep his balance. He coughed and spit out blood and more than one tooth onto the pristine ceramic tiles. Within seconds Anakin was on him again, not giving him a moment’s respite. He felt Anakin’s boot connect with his back, sending him sprawling to the floor, his clothes now smeared with his own blood. Palo slowly got onto his hands and knees as Anakin watched him with grim satisfaction. Growing impatient, Anakin grabbed him by the collar and hauled him onto his feet, shoving him roughly against the wall.

“Now you’ve gone too far,” Anakin told him, his voice full of rage. He had him pinned against the wall with one hand at his throat. Palo looked at Anakin, his eyes bulging with fear. He could see the murderous fury in Anakin’s eyes. “You’re going to pay for what you’ve done,” Anakin told him as his grip tightened.

“Anakin, please,” Padmé pleaded with him. “Don’t kill him! That’s murder!”

Anakin looked down at his wife who stood at his side, looking up at, her dark eyes imploring him not to kill. In that instant he saw her eyes as she pleaded with him on Mustafar, pleaded with him to come with her, to run away and raise their child together, and then, finally, to spare her life...

He released Palo at once, and the hapless administrator slumped to the ground. He looked down at him. “As ironic as it may seem, you have my wife to thank for your life,” he told Palo. “But should our paths ever cross again, make no mistake; I will not be so merciful.”

Palo did not reply, his fear paralyzing him into silence. He could only sit slumped against the wall and thank the Maker that Padmé had managed to talk her husband out of killing him outright for he was certain that Anakin Skywalker was more than capable of killing.

Anakin turned to his wife. "You're coming with us," he told her. "I won't leave you here with this monster for another moment."

Padmé nodded. "I want to come," she told him.

Anakin smiled, and reached out to take her hand. To his surprise, she put her hand in his. Jobal took her other hand, and together the three of them left the room and headed for the exit.

Chapter 29

Chapter 29

Padmé felt strange as she walked outside with Anakin and her mother. Anakin had managed somehow to distract the security and the staff, in a manner that amazed Padmé. *It's almost as though he has some sort of unusual powers*, Padmé reflected, looking up at her husband. *My husband... who is little more than a stranger to me...*

"The speeder is this way," Anakin said, leading his wife and mother-in-law away from the grounds of the facility.

Padmé turned and looked over her shoulder at the high stone wall that surrounded what had been her home for the past twenty years. She had never seen it from the outside, and it was a surreal experience.

"Angel?"

Padmé turned to see Anakin looking at her. "What did you call me?" she asked.

"I called you Angel," he told her with a smile. "That was my name for you."

"Because you asked me if I was an angel when we met," she said, pleased at having made the connection.

Anakin nodded, his smile growing. "That's right," he said.

Padmé smiled at him.

"Here we go, hon," Jobal said as she helped Padmé into the speeder. "We'll be home soon."

Padmé felt an unfamiliar sensation of freedom as Anakin lifted the craft off the ground and headed for the mountains. She watched the scenery pass them by, wishing fervently that something, anything, looked familiar to her. *It will come back*, she told herself. *Just give it time... be patient.*

Anakin could sense Padmé's tumult of emotions as she sat at his side. He could feel her excitement, her sense of wonder as they passed by the beautiful sights of Theed. He wanted to tell her everything all at once, about her life here, about their life together, about their children; but he knew that he could not do so, for it would only serve to confuse and overwhelm her.

"How beautiful," Padmé said as they passed by the great waterfall near that predominated the city landscape.

"You've always loved the water," Anakin told her.

"Have I?" she asked.

Anakin nodded, keeping his attention on his flying. “You have,” he told her. “You love to swim, love the rain,” he said.

Padmé listened to him, trying to imagine what it felt like to swim. “I do love the rain,” she told him. “There have been a few times I’ve been out in the garden when it started, and I loved it. Of course they always made me come back inside,” she told him.

“Well now you can stand out in the rain as long as you wish,” Jobal told her, putting her hand on Padmé’s shoulder. “Just like you used to do when you were a little girl.”

Padmé smiled. “That sounds like fun,” she said.

“Is this the house I grew up in?” Padmé asked as the three of them entered the Nabberrie home a short time later.

“Yes it is,” Jobal told her. ‘I hope you don’t mind that I’ve asked your sister to come over,’ she added. “She hasn’t seen you in a while, and is anxious to welcome you home.”

“I would love to see her again,” Padmé told her mother as they walked into the parlor. She looked around the cozy room, feeling certain that she had enjoyed many wonderful times within it.

“Would you like to see your room?” Anakin asked her.

She turned and looked at him. “Yes, I would,” she said.

He held out his hand to her. “Come with me,” he said.

Padmé put her hand in his and let him lead her down the corridor. Jobal watched with a smile, feeling confident that it was only a matter of time before Padmé’s memories started to come back now that Anakin was back in her life.

“This is it,” Anakin said as they entered her bedroom. Padmé walked into the room, looking at the arrangement of furniture, and then moving over to look at the holographs that hung in frames on each wall of the room.

“That one is from your first day as an apprentice legislator,” Anakin told her. ‘You were eleven years old I believe. And this one,’ he continued, pointing to the next holo, “was when you went to Shadda-Bi-Boran. You were helping to relocate the children because the planet’s sun was imploding.”

Padmé looked at the child she was holding in her arms, the smile on his face. “I wish I could remember him,” she said softly. “He looks like such a sweetheart.”

Anakin turned to her. “That was his name,” he told her. “I don’t remember the native word, but it meant sweetheart.”

“Really?” Padmé asked.

“Yes, really,” he replied. “You were always such a champion for those less fortunate than yourself, such a defender of justice. You made a wonderful leader, Padmé.”

“I was a leader?” she asked him.

"You were a queen," he told her. "And then a senator. You served your people for almost ten years."

Padmé shook her head. "I never would have guessed that," she said, looking back at the holograph of the smiling, laughing child. Looking at it made her remember a question she needed to ask.

"Anakin, do we have any children?" she asked, turning to him.

Anakin turned to her, not surprised by her question. He knew it was only a matter of time before she asked it.

"Yes, we do," he told her. "We have twins, a son and a daughter."

Padmé stared at him, trying to determine how she felt upon hearing this news. She was elated to know that she was a mother, and yet grief stricken that she had no memory of her children. She had not seen them in twenty years; would they even know her now?

"What are their names?" she asked.

"Luke and Leia," Anakin told her.

"Where are they? Why aren't they with you?" she asked.

"It's a rather complicated situation," Anakin told her gently. "They are currently involved with the Rebel Alliance, perhaps you've heard of it."

"Yes, I have," Padmé replied. "They are rebels?"

Anakin nodded. "Yes, they are," he said. 'Leia is the image of you,' he told her with a smile. "Though I think her personality is more like mine."

"And Luke?" she asked.

"He resembles me," he told her. "He has my eyes, but he's smaller in stature than me. I think he's a mix of both of us, actually, both in his looks and his nature."

"I want to meet them," she said. "Is that possible?"

"I think so," he told her. "I know they are very anxious to meet you."

"Have they believed me to be dead all these years too?" she asked.

Anakin nodded. "Yes," he said.

Padmé frowned. "I have missed so much," she said softly. "I don't remember them at all... nothing."

Anakin felt terrible for her pain, but did not know what to say to assuage it. Those twenty years were gone, and nothing could bring them back. He himself had missed their children's entire lives also, and had only recently learned of their very existence; so in a way, he could relate to what she was feeling.

"I'm sorry, Padmé," he said simply, not knowing what else to say. "So sorry."

She looked at him. "Will you help me to remember, Anakin?" she asked him.

Anakin smiled at her. “Yes,” he said. ‘I will. I want to take you to a place you loved very much, Padmé,’ he told her. “We fell in love there, and were married there too. Will you let me take you there?”

Padmé was uncertain. The thought of seeing a place that held so much significance to her at one time excited her, for it could potentially help to unlock the memories within her mind. Yet, the thought of being alone with Anakin, without her mother, without her sister, was rather unnerving to her still. Yes, he was her husband, but until three days ago, she did not know he existed. He was little more than a stranger to her at this point.

“I... I don’t know,” she answered at last, looking away from him. “Let me think about it.”

Anakin sensed her reticence, and the reason for it, and it broke his heart. The lake retreat had always been their sanctuary; the times they had shared there were magical and memorable. But she knew nothing of those times; she knew nothing of the love that had bloomed there, or the vows they had made to one another there. *But she will remember them*, he vowed. *She will remember me*.

“Padmé, your sister is here,” Jobal said, poking her head into the room.

“Thanks Mom,” she said. She looked up at Anakin briefly before leaving the room. Anakin stood alone in the room for a moment, trying to maintain his positive attitude. But it was so hard to have the woman he loved look at him with no love in her eyes. She was his soul mate, and yet to her he was little more than a stranger. *It will not be this way forever*, he reminded himself. *It will come back to her... the day we met, when we fell in love, our wedding...* He stopped as a thought crept into his mind— Mustafar. *How do I tell her what happened there? How do I explain why I attacked her and abandoned her?* He had not considered this, and now that he had, it filled him with a cold sense of dread. She will no doubt want to know why she had been found on the streets of Theed, why the twins were raised apart, why she’d been in such a state; and it would all come back to Mustafar, and to his attack upon her. *This is your punishment for what you did*, he told himself. *You will have to tell her yourself what you did to her there, you will have to see the look in her eyes when you tell her that you tried to kill her...*

With that sobering thought, he left the room to rejoin his wife and her family.

Padmé was embracing her sister, Sola, when Anakin entered the parlor. When Sola saw Anakin, she released Padmé and turned to him.

“Anakin, it’s good to see you again,” Sola said with a smile. “I am so grateful to you for getting Padmé out of that place. My mother has told me everything.”

“Padmé means everything to me,” Anakin said, looking at his wife. “Once I realized what was going on in that place, I couldn’t rest until I’d taken her as far away as possible.”

Padmé smiled at him, seeing the depth of love he felt for her in his eyes. The intensity of his love for her astonished her, and on one level, it excited her as well. To have the love and devotion of such an attractive, powerful man was flattering, and it made Padmé wonder what her life with him must have been like.

Anakin could see the thoughts in her mind, and he smiled. She was starting to get curious, that was a good thing. Her wanting to remember would be instrumental in her regaining her

memory.

After the family had lunch together, Sola announced that she and her daughters were going to take Padmé shopping. Anakin was not sure he liked the idea, but kept his opinion to himself for the moment. Padmé seemed so excited by the idea, that he did not have the heart to voice his concerns.

"There are so many lovely outfits at Reginald's," Ryoo said. "Aunt Padmé you would look amazing in any of them, you have such a beautiful figure."

Padmé smiled. "That's very kind of you," she said. "I don't need much, though," she began.

"Nonsense," Sola said. "You have always had the most amazing wardrobe, Padmé. I know you don't remember that right now, but you will, and when you do, you'll be horrified if you don't have at least a dozen lovely outfits to choose from. Besides you want to look nice for your husband, don't you?"

Padmé blushed, and caught Anakin's eye. "I... I suppose so..." she said.

"Padmé looks beautiful to me no matter what she is wearing," Anakin declared.

Padmé smiled at him and Sola exchanged a smile with her mother.

"Well let's be going then," she said, standing up. "Girls, you can clean up for grandmum."

"That won't be necessary," Jobal said. "My dishwasher is finally fixed, thanks to Anakin here."

"Oh?" Sola said, looking at Anakin. "You're a handy man too?"

Anakin smiled. "In a manner of speaking," he replied. "And I can clean up," he added. "I don't want to hold you ladies up from your big shopping excursion."

"Don't you want to come?" Padmé asked him as he stood up and started clearing the dishes.

He was thrilled that she wanted him along; but the thought of dress shopping with four women was a little more than he could handle. "Uh... thanks for thinking of me," he said. "But I think maybe I'd just be in the way. You show me what you bought later," he told her with a smile.

"Very well," Padmé replied, oddly disappointed that he would not be coming with them. "I'll see you later."

Anakin nodded. "I'll be here," he told her with a smile.

Soon enough, the house was empty, all the women having gone into the village to help Padmé pick out a new wardrobe. Anakin felt oddly out of place as he loaded the dishwasher and tidied up the kitchen. *Isn't this what droids are for?* He wondered.

Finally his task was finished, and he left the kitchen, satisfied that he had done a fine job. He wandered outside, enjoying the smell of the flowers in the Nabberie garden. Spying one particular bloom, he smiled as he was reminded of something from long ago. Carefully he

bent to the blossoms and picked four of them. He smiled, enjoying their delicate scent, and then continued his leisurely stroll around the garden.

“Sola, I will *not* wear that,” Padmé insisted as her sister handed her a long black negligee.

“Why not?” Sola asked. “It would make Anakin go wild,” she added with a smile.

Padmé’s face turned red, and she felt extremely uncomfortable.

“Padme, I’m sorry to embarrass you,” Sola said. “But surely you’ve considered that at some point you and Anakin will resume all aspects of your married life.”

“I hadn’t thought of that at all,” Padme said, looking at another rack of clothes.

Sola watched her sister. “Liar,” she said.

“Excuse me?” Padme said, looking up at her.

“Don’t tell me you haven’t noticed how handsome Anakin is,” Sola said.

Padmé shrugged. “I suppose he’s handsome,” she replied.

“You suppose?” Sola said with a laugh. “Oh come on, Padmé. You may have lost your memory but you’re not blind.”

“Will you stop harassing your poor sister?” Jobal said, shocked by Sola.

Sola shrugged and put the garment back. “I’m only trying to help,” she said.

“Padmé will do just fine without that sort of help,” Jobal said. “Now come along, the girls are in the shoe department and if you’re not there to stop them they will run your credit account up to the stars, Sola.”

“You’re right,” Sola said, leaving Jobal and Padmé.

“I’m sorry Sola was so... nosy,” Jobal said. “She means well.”

“I know she does,” Padmé said. “But Anakin is a stranger to me right now, Mom; doesn’t she get that?”

Jobal nodded. “I think so,” she replied. “But he won’t always be, Padmé. Besides, it’s pretty obvious by the way you look at one another that there is a considerable amount of attraction between the two of you.”

Padmé frowned. “I haven’t looked at him in any particular way,” she said.

Jobal nodded with a smile. “If you say so,” she replied. “Let’s go get this checked out. I need to get home to start dinner soon.”

“I’ll be right there,” Padmé said. Jobal walked away to find Sola and her daughters. Padmé waited until her mother had gone, and then picked up the negligee that Sola had replaced on the rack.

The quiet of the house was soon shattered by the return of the shoppers, and Anakin was surrounded in the parlor by the Naberrie women who all had several items to show one another. Padme was the quietest by far, and Anakin could see that she was beginning to feel overwhelmed by all that had happened.

“Would you like me to help you take your things to your room?” he asked her as Sola’s girls checked out their mother’s purchases.

“Yes,” she replied. “Thank you.”

Anakin stood up and picked up the bags that Padmé had brought home. He walked with her to her room and set the bags down at the foot of her bed.

“Thank you,” she said. ‘I’m afraid I don’t share my sister’s zeal for shopping,’ she told him with a smile. “Did I used to like shopping?”

“No,” Anakin told her. “You hated it as a matter of fact.”

“Well at least that hasn’t changed,” she said, relieved to hear it. She noticed a vase of freshly cut flowers on the table beside her bed. “Where did these come from?” she asked.

“I put them there,” he said. “I remembered how much you liked this particular flower.”

She looked up at him. “I did?”

He nodded. “It was your favorite,” he told her. “In fact, that was the very flower you carried at our wedding.”

Padme smiled and bent to smell the blossoms. Smelling their delicate fragrance created an unusual reaction within her, as memories, fleeting and elusive, flooded her mind. They were gone too quickly for her to grab a hold of them, but they gave her hope. She looked up at Anakin, who was watching her intently, sensing that something was happening.

“Did you know that a human’s sense of smell elicits memory more than any other sense?” he asked her with a smile.

“I didn’t know that,” she replied. “But I believe it now.”

“You are starting to remember, aren’t you?” he asked.

“I... I had something fleet through my mind,” she told him. “But it came and went so quickly I can’t even describe it. It’s more like feelings than memories, though.

“What feelings?” he asked.

“Good ones,” she told him. ‘Happy ones. I must associate these flowers with times when I was happy.’ She looked up at him. “And you remembered that they were my favorite,” she said.

“Of course I did,” he said. “I remember everything about you, Padmé. Your favorite color, your favorite song, that place on your neck that makes you crazy when I kiss you there,” he told her with a smile.

Padmé felt her face grow warm again, and the words of her sister rushed to her mind unheeded.

Anakin could see that she was a little uneasy with his candor, and so he changed the subject. “Come on,” he said. “I’m sure your mom could use some help with dinner, and somehow I’ve ended up as the delegated kitchen assistant.”

Padme couldn't help but laugh, and left the room with him, once again captivated by her husband's charm.

Chapter 30

Chapter 30

Anakin found the chat around the dinner table to be rather amusing, and almost surreal. Sola's husband was unable to join them, and so he was the only male surrounded by the women of the Naberrie family. He could barely keep up with the banter that was flying back and forth between them. Much of the conversation was centered on the latest date that young Ryoo had had with the newest man in her life. He wondered if his own daughter engaged in such silly talk when it came to Han Solo. *Somehow I doubt it...*

"So Mum says you're going up to the lake retreat," Sola said, addressing Anakin as the family sat in the parlor after dinner.

He looked at Padmé, and then back at Sola. "Well, perhaps eventually," he replied. "I don't want to push Padmé into doing something she's not comfortable with."

"Why would you be uncomfortable going up there?" Sola asked her sister. "You love it up there!"

"I don't remember it, Sola," Padmé explained, trying to be patient with her sister's pushiness. "I may very well have loved it, just as I loved many things, many people; but I don't remember. I hope in time I will, but right now, it's just a place that's unfamiliar."

"I'm sorry," Sola said. "I didn't mean to upset you, Padmé."

"You haven't" Padmé replied. "I'm just...tired, that's all. It's been a very eventful day."

"Yes, it certainly has," Anakin said. 'And a very long one as well.' He looked at his wife. "Maybe it's time you got to bed, Angel."

Padmé noticed her nieces exchange a smile at the sound of his pet name for her. "Perhaps you're right," she said. "I am pretty tired."

"And we should be going too," Sola said. 'It's been so wonderful spending time with you this way, Padmé,' she said, standing up and walking over to Padmé. "Let's be sure to do it again soon."

Padmé stood up to hug her sister. "Absolutely," she said. "I look forward to it."

After all the goodbyes had been said, Sola and Pooja had gone, Padmé decided it was time for her to retire as well. She and Anakin bade goodnight to Jobal and Ryoo, and left the room together.

"You'll have to show me your purchases tomorrow," Anakin said as they left the room. "I know how tired you are."

She looked at him as a thought struck her. "I forgot that I bought something for you when we were out," she told him. "I felt badly that I was getting all these lovely new clothes, and didn't want you to feel left out."

Anakin smiled. "That was very thoughtful of you," he said. "Thank you."

"Well, don't thank me yet," she said. "Maybe you won't even like them."

"If you picked them out, then I'm sure I will," he replied.

Anakin followed her into her room, and sat down in one of the upholstered chairs in the corner. He watched her as she opened the parcels that were piled on her bed.

"That looks nice," he said as she pulled out a dress to hang up.

"My mother thought the color suited me," she said, holding it up against herself. "What do you think?"

"I think your mother has excellent taste," he replied. "It suits you perfectly."

Padmé smiled, and then hung the dress up in her wardrobe. Next she pulled out a two piece set, trousers and a blouse. And then a long, more formal dress.

Anakin paid little attention to the clothes she was showing him, although he made sure to comment on each item. He was far more engaged by her, by her enthusiasm and excitement. He was seeing more and more of the Padmé he once knew, and it fueled his hopes that the memory loss she had suffered was reversible, and that given enough time, she would come back to him.

Finally, when she had almost reached the end of the purchases, which included several new pairs of shoes and at least three pairs of boots, she found the items that she had bought for him.

"And finally," she said, "at the bottom of the very last bag, of course, are the things I bought for you."

Anakin stood up and walked over to her. "That was very kind of you," he said, taking the clothing from her. "Thank you."

"No need to thank me," she said. "It was the least I could do after everything you've done for me."

Anakin put the pile of clothing on the bed and picked up each item one at a time to look at it. For not having any memory of him, she did a very good job of choosing clothing that both suited him and fit him. He was delighted.

"Do you like them?" she asked.

"Yes, very much," he said as he looked over at her. "You knew exactly what to get."

Padmé smiled. "Lucky guess," she commented.

Anakin laughed. "Maybe so, but I..." he stopped as he looked at the last item he held in his hand. It was silky, and long, sleeveless and black— and obviously not meant for him. He looked at her with wide eyes. "Is this for me too?" he asked with a smile. "It's lovely, but I think it might be too small."

Padmé was horrified. "I... no, I mean, no it isn't," she said, snatching it from his hands. "I'm sorry... Sola talked me into that one... I don't know why I let her..." she stammered,

her face utterly red.

Anakin did his best not to laugh at her embarrassment, and merely smiled as she hastily shoved the negligee into a drawer. A mental image of her wearing something very similar to that popped into his mind, and he had to turn away from her lest she notice the way he was looking at her.

"Well I guess it's time we both got some sleep," he said awkwardly, picking up the pile of clothing from the bed once again. "I hope you sleep well," he added.

"Thank you," she said. "Goodnight Anakin."

"Goodnight Padmé."

Anakin walked across the hall to the room where he would spend what was sure to be a restless night. He set the clothes his wife had bought for him on the chair in the corner of the room, and then sat down on the edge of the bed. So much had happened in the past twenty-four hours that he had scarcely had time to take it all in. The fact that his wife, his angel, was sleeping in the room across the hall from him was incredible to him; having spent half his life thinking she was dead, it still seemed like a dream that she was actually alive. He smiled to himself when he remembered the look on Padmé's face when he had held up the slinky negligee. The fact that she had purchased it at all was quite surprising to him. She had said that Sola had talked her into it; but he knew his wife well, and knew that she could not be talked into anything unless on some level she wanted it herself. *But why would she? Unless she was thinking that at some point she would be wearing it for me... no... Don't even go there,* he told himself as he pulled off his tunic. The fact that she was sleeping so close by was frustrating enough; but to think that she had bought that piece of lingerie for him was too much.

Kicking off his boots, he lay back on the bed, his arms under his head, and stared up at the ceiling, trying his utmost to put the image of his wife wearing a black negligee out of his mind.

Although he had seemingly forgotten the fact that he had undergone massive surgery a short time ago, Anakin could not deny how exhausted he was. It had been an emotional few days; he had not even realized how tired he was until he fell into a deep sleep mere moments after he had closed his eyes.

He woke up several hours later having had a very vivid dream about his wife. He had dreamed of their home on Coruscant, he was teasing her, as he often did, and she was laughing and smiling at him in the way that made his knees grow weak.

Deciding that he would sleep no more that night, Anakin got out of bed, pulled on his sleep shirt and left his room.

It must be hard to have sworn your allegiance to the Jedi Order. It is so demanding, isn't it?

Yes, very much so.

I can't imagine not being able to go the places you want, or do the things you want to do.

Or be with the people I love?

Love? Are you even allowed to love? I thought that was forbidden for a Jedi.

Attachment if forbidden. Possession is forbidden; but compassion, which I believe is truly the heart of real, unconditional love, is at the very core of every Jedi. It is what makes us who we are. So, I suppose you could say that we are encouraged to love.

You have grown up, Anakin. You have changed so much since you were that little boy I knew so long ago.

You haven't changed a bit. You're exactly the way I imagined you in my daydreams...

Padmé sat up in her bed, the dream she'd just had startling her into a wakened state. *Was that a dream? Or a memory?* She wondered. The young man she had seen looked very much like Anakin, but younger. *Was this a memory of my past with him?* She sighed and lay down on her side once again, closed her eyes and tried to return to the dream she'd just been having.

Sixth planet of the Hoth System— Echo Base Hangar Bay

"I don't care what Goldenrod told you, you are *not* taking apart that motivator again, got it?"

Chewbacca grunted something in response, which only made Han roll his eyes in response.

"Yeah, same to you pal," Han muttered. He made his way back to the hold and noticed that the comm. screen indicator was blinking.

Han sat down at the screen and activated it. The face of Anakin Skywalker appeared.

"Hey," Han said, still unnerved by the former Dark Lord. "What's up?"

"Solo," Anakin replied with a nod. "I would like to speak to my children."

"Sure thing," Han replied. "How's your wife?"

"She is well, thank you," Anakin told him.

Han nodded. "Glad to hear it. I'll go find Luke and Leia."

"Thank you," Anakin replied.

Han got up and left the hold of the ship, grumbling about being a secretary for the Skywalker family. He found Leia conferring with General Dodonna in the newly built command center. She looked at him when he spoke to her.

"Message for you Princess," he said. "From your dad."

Leia knew that Han meant her *real* father. She and Luke's relationship to Anakin was still a secret from all but Han, Chewbacca and, of course, Obi-Wan. As far as Dodonna knew, it was Bail Organa who was contacting his daughter.

"I'll be right back," she told Dodonna.

"Give your father my best regards," he said in reply.

Yeah, that's likely to happen, Leia reflected as she walked away with Han.

“Any idea where Luke is?” Han asked.

“He’s out doing sentry duty,” Leia replied. She looked at her wrist chrono. ‘He’ll be finished his shift soon.’ She activated her comm. link. “Luke, so you read me?”

The sound of strong wind was heard, followed by Luke’s voice. “Copy Echo Six.”

Han smirked at Luke’s attention to protocol.

“Luke, come to the Falcon when you’re finished your shift,” Leia said.

“Everything okay?” Luke asked.

“I don’t know,” Leia replied as she and Han entered the hangar bay. “I’m about to find out.”

Luke was silent for a moment and all that was heard was the howling wind. “I’ll be there in ten minutes,” he said finally. “Echo Three out.”

Leia ran into the freighter and to the comm. screen. She sat down, smiling when she saw her father’s face.

“Hi,” she said. She noticed the way he was dressed. “Going casual?” she asked with a smile.

Anakin glanced down at himself, and laughed. “Well it’s the middle of the night here,” he explained.

“Can’t sleep?” Leia asked an expression of concern on her face.

“I’ve slept some, but I think I’m finished for the night,” he told her.

“How’s Mother?” she asked.

“She is well,” he replied. “I took her out of that place; she’s here with me at your grandmother’s house.”

“That’s such a relief to hear,” Leia replied with a smile. “I suppose she’s sleeping right now though, isn’t she?”

Anakin nodded. “Yes,” he said. “But she wants to see you and Luke. I told her about you.”

“What was her reaction?” Leia asked.

Anakin was about to reply when Luke entered the hold, still dressed in his outdoor gear.

“Hi,” he said his face still red from the cold. “What’s going on?”

“Mother is staying at Grandmother’s house now,” Leia told her brother. “Dad told her about us, Luke.”

“You did?” Luke asked, looking at Anakin.

“Yes,” Anakin replied. “She asked if we had any children, so I told her about you. She is very anxious to meet you.”

“And we want to meet her too,” Leia replied. “Can we make that happen somehow?” she asked her father.

Anakin sighed. "I don't know, Leia," he replied. "As much as I would like to have the three of you meet, it's far too dangerous for you to be traveling across the galaxy. The emperor has spies everywhere. It's simply too dangerous."

Leia and Luke were disappointed, but they understood their father's line of reasoning. They knew how relentless Palpatine was, and knew that he would be more than willing to use them to exact his revenge upon their father.

"Can we at least talk to her?" Luke asked. "On here?"

Anakin nodded. "Of course," he replied. "I will contact you tomorrow."

"I can't wait to meet her," said Leia with a smile.

"She knows nothing of what happened at Polis Massa or at Mustafar," Anakin told them. "Not yet."

"We'll be careful what we say," Luke said. "Don't worry."

"Very well," Anakin said, stifling a yawn.

"Looks like you need some rest," Leia said.

"I think you may be right," Anakin replied. "I will talk to you tomorrow."

"Goodnight Father," Luke said. "Sleep well."

Anakin switched off the comm. screen and stood up, stretching as he did so. As he approached his room, he stopped at Padmé's door. He thought he'd heard her voice, and listened for a moment. *I must be imagining things*; he thought when he heard nothing. He waited a moment longer, and then returned to his own room.

Chapter 31

Chapter 31

Superstar Destroyer Executor

“Get out.”

“But, my lord, I thought that...”

“You *thought*? You are incapable of thought. Now get out before I lose my temper again.”

Zylas Ka picked up her clothes and hastily got dressed as she made her way towards the exit of the Dark Lord’s sumptuous quarters. She wasn’t the first woman who had warmed the bed of the arrogant young Sith, and no doubt would not be the last. He had always been a magnet for women, attractive and charming; but now that he was commander of the Imperial Fleet, his allure had increased tremendously. Power is the ultimate aphrodisiac, as the old saying goes; and this certainly seemed to be the case now that Ferreus was the right hand of the emperor. Being the self-serving and immoral individual that he was, Ferreus took full advantage of his new status.

Zylas glanced briefly at the huge gilded mirror on the way out of Ferreus’ quarters and cringed when she saw the bruises already starting to appear on her face.

“GET OUT!”

Zylas ran out the door, not even bothering to fasten the buttons of her tunic. She received a few looks when she stumbled out into the corridor, but it was not unusual to see a woman leaving Lord Ferreus’ quarters in such a state. The officers and men of the *Executor* were certainly used to his sordid lifestyle.

The crew of the *Executor* had come to loathe their commanding officer. He was arrogant, capricious and rude; his ability to command rather suspect at best. Yet, he was the emperor’s right hand, and possessed powers that enabled him to instill fear into the men who served under him.

Admiral Ozzel entered the bridge and looked around for his second officer. “Piett!” he bellowed.

“Yes sir,” Firmus Piett replied, appearing at Ozzel’s elbow almost instantly.

“Are the reports in from the Sullust System?” Ozzel demanded.

“Yes sir,” Piett replied. “Nothing yet, sir.”

Ozzel nodded his understanding. “And where is Lord Ferreus?” he asked.

“I haven’t seen him for several hours, sir,” Piett replied. Muttering from some of the men was heard, and Piett was certain that he knew what they were saying.

“Entertaining again, is he?” Ozzel muttered, disgusted by his commanding officer’s blatant contempt for anything resembling discipline.

“I believe so, sir,” Piett replied.

Lord Vader would never have behaved this way, Piett reflected. Although Piett had never served under Vader, he knew Vader’s reputation well. Vader had been a draconian commander, but he was an excellent leader, his decisions and battle savvy nothing short of genius. Ferreus possessed none of Vader’s presence, despite his ability to wield the same mysterious power that Vader had. Still, the officers followed him, simply because the emperor commanded it, and no one was about to question the emperor. *No one except Vader...* Piett reflected. He almost wished he had had the opportunity to serve under Vader, despite his fearsome reputation. *Anyone who had the courage to do what Vader had must have been a remarkable man*, Piett decided. He pushed the thought from his mind and returned to his station to continue monitoring the reports coming in from the Sullust System.

Naboo-Naberrie home

Padmé woke up the next morning, disoriented for a moment. She looked around the room where she had slept as a girl, wishing that it looked familiar to her. Yet it did not, not yet. *It will come back*, Padmé told herself. *Perhaps it has already begun.*

She reflected upon the dream she’d had the previous night as she made her way to the fresher for a shower. She had been on a space voyage with Anakin, and it seemed like they were trying to hide from someone. Most of the details were vague, but one thing was clear; the way Anakin looked at her spoke of a deep love that burned deep within him. *Was this a memory of an actual conversation? Or simply a dream projected by the feelings that his entry into my life has created?* She made a mental note to mention the dream to him; perhaps he would remember the conversation. She hoped fervently that he would, for it would mean that her memory was indeed starting to return.

Padmé found her mother in the kitchen a little while later. Jobal turned to her and smiled.

“Good morning, Padmé,” Jobal said, kissing her daughter on the cheek. “Did you sleep well?”

Padmé nodded. “Yes I did,” she replied. “I had a dream about Anakin last night.”

“Oh?” Jobal asked as she placed a platter of freshly baked scones on the table. “Was it a pleasant dream?”

“Well, it wasn’t unpleasant,” she replied as she helped her mother set plates on the table.

“Do you think it’s a memory?” Jobal asked.

“I hope so,” Padmé replied as she sat down with her mother. “I mean to ask Anakin about it, see if he remembers such a conversation.”

“Good idea,” Jobal replied, sipping at her tea. ‘He’s still sleeping I think.’ She glanced at her wrist chrono. “I have a doctor’s appointment this morning,” she said. “I need to leave pretty soon. Will you be alright here without me?”

“Yes,” Padmé replied. “I will. Don’t worry,” she said with a smile.

Jobal nodded, relieved that her daughter was starting to release some of the anxiety that had become so much a part of her in the past twenty years. *Thanks to that monster Palo*, Jobal thought angrily. “You really ought to reconsider going up to the retreat,” she told Padmé. “Even if it’s just for a few days. If you feel uneasy, then come back home.”

Padmé was silent as she considered this. “I don’t know,” she said.

“Don’t you trust Anakin?” Jobal asked pointedly.

Padmé looked up at her. “Yes, I trust him,” she replied.

“Then what is the problem?” Jobal asked. “He tells me that you and he shared some wonderful times up there. Perhaps it is just what you need to trigger your memory.”

Padmé sighed. “Perhaps,” she said.

Jobal smiled. “I’m sorry if I seem pushy,” she said, reaching out and putting her hand on Padmé’s. “I just want you to be happy, Padmé; and it seems to me that Anakin is the one who can do that. You and he shared something very special.”

Padmé nodded. “I get that impression too,” she said.

“Then isn’t it worth trying to recapture?” Jobal suggested. “Even if it means taking a chance or two?”

“I suppose so,” Padmé replied.

Jobal finished her scone and then stood up. “I’ll be back in an hour or so,” she told Padmé.

“Okay,” Padmé replied. “I’ll see you soon.”

Jobal left the kitchen, leaving Padmé alone to contemplate their conversation.

The overhead lights screamed mercilessly into his eyes, only adding to the torment he was going through. Nightmarish sounds surrounded him, and to his horror he realized that it was the sound of his own screams that he heard. Droids surrounded him, ruthlessly probing the tortured remains of his limbs, the pain they inflicted with their cold machinery beyond imagination. He flailed his phantom arm, merely a stump now, as the relentless droids attempted to hold him still so that they could finish their task. The sound of the drill was not loud enough to drown out the sound of his screams as it bore into his exposed bone...

“Lord Vader? Can you hear me?”

“Yes, my master... where is Padmé? Is she safe? Is she alright?”

“It seems in your anger...you killed her.”

“No... I couldn’t have!! She was alive!! I felt her!! NO!!”

Anakin was awoken by someone gently shaking his shoulder. His eyes snapped open, his heart still racing from the horrifying visions of his dream. They darted around for a second or two until they alit on a face: her face, the face of his angel. *She’s not dead! I didn’t kill her! She’s alive!!*

He sat up and pulled Padmé to him, embracing her tightly. Padmé was startled, and was not sure what to do. It was obvious that he'd been having a nightmare; his body was trembling and clammy with sweat. Instinctively she returned his embrace, doing her best to comfort him as he fought to shake the terrifying visions from his mind.

Finally he realized where he was, and what he was doing. He released her at once and pulled back, looking at her as though still trying to convince himself that she was truly there and not just a figment of his imagination.

"I... I'm sorry..." he stammered. "I didn't know what I was doing..."

"It's alright," she told him. "You were having a nightmare. I heard you from the kitchen."

Anakin frowned. "Yes, I was," he replied quietly. He ran a hand through his sweat soaked hair. "It was terrible," he added, looking away from her.

Padmé nodded. "I could tell," she replied. "Do you want to tell me about it?"

He looked back into her eyes. "No," he decided. "I don't... I'd just as soon put it out of my mind completely."

"Alright," she said, standing up, feeling the need to put some distance between them all of a sudden. 'I had a dream I'd like to talk to you about, though,' she told him. "I'm not certain, but I think it may be a memory. I was hoping you could tell me if I'm right."

Anakin looked up at her. "Tell me about it," he said.

"Okay," she said, walking away from his bed. "We were in a ship, a transport of some sort I think, there were other people there. I was asking you about your life as a Jedi, and how difficult it must be, how you could never go where you want..."

"Or be with the people that I love," Anakin interjected. "I remember that conversation. We were on our way here to Naboo. It was before we were married."

Padmé's eyes widened. "You mean... that really happened? I was remembering it?"

Anakin smiled, the joy in her eyes serving to cast the last remnants of his nightmare from his mind. "Yes," he said. "You were."

"Oh Anakin, do you realize what this means?" she asked excitedly.

Anakin nodded, continuing to smile at her. "You are coming back to me," he said. "To all of us."

Padmé nodded. "I can't believe, it," she said, "Eventually I'll remember my childhood, the day we met, our wedding, the birth of our children... everything!"

Yes, everything... and when you do, what will you think of me then?

"That's wonderful, Angel," he said, smiling. "I couldn't be happier."

Chapter 32

Chapter 32

Sixth Planet of the Hoth System

Obi-Wan Kenobi stomped the snow from his boots as he entered the base. He unwrapped the muffler from his face, snow falling to the floor with each movement he made. *I'm getting too old for this*, he thought to himself as he made his way into the command center.

The Rebel commanders were concerned that Kenobi was pushing himself too far; the old Jedi was well into his sixties now, and the harsh elements were cruel to old bones and joints. Many a night Kenobi would find himself aching from the cold, and curse the one who had decided that Hoth was a good location for a base. Yet, he was determined to do his part, and so he took his turn doing sentry duty, braving the bitter cold temperatures, driving snow and highly strung tauntauns to do so.

"Anything to report, Master Kenobi?" General Dodonna asked as Obi-Wan entered the command center.

"The usual," Obi-Wan said as he took down his hood. "Those snow creatures are starting to move off, thankfully."

Dodonna nodded. "Thank the Maker for that," he muttered, shuddering as he remembered what had happened to two unfortunate individuals who had been ambushed by the terrifying snow creatures.

"I suggest you consider setting up long range sensors, General," Kenobi said. "The Empire is surely combing the galaxy for us; it would be advantageous to us if we knew they were coming."

"We've been working on the technology," Dodonna told him. "The trouble is the damn cold just makes everything we try stop working within a few hours."

Kenobi nodded. "I see," he said. "Well perhaps the same adaptations you've made to the spacecraft could be used to enable the sensors to withstand the cold."

"That's an idea," Dodonna said. "I'll suggest it to the technical crew at once."

Obi-Wan was about to walk away when Dodonna called him back. "Obi-Wan, a word with you please," he said.

Obi-Wan turned back and looked at the general. "Yes?" he asked.

"I suppose you've heard that Princess Leia has changed her name," Dodonna said, folding his arms over his chest.

Obi-Wan nodded, looking at the man to determine his thoughts. "Yes, I have," he said. "What of it?"

“Well, do I need to say it?” Dodonna asked. “Surely you must see what my concern is, Obi-Wan. You of all people would.”

“I’m afraid you’ll have to be a little more explicit, General,” Obi-Wan said.

“Skywalker, is that explicit enough?” Dodonna asked. “Luke Skywalker, Leia Skywalker — its’ the very name that you told me belonged to Darth Vader not one month ago. I think I understand now why the princess was so anxious to trust him now. They must be related, the three of them.”

“Perhaps,” Obi-Wan replied, remaining calm.

“Don’t you see this as a serious security issue?” Dodonna asked. “If the two of them are related to Vader, then they could be feeding him information about our whereabouts, our troop strengths, all of our security codes, you name it!”

Obi-Wan could understand how the general would be upset; Vader had been the sworn enemy of the Alliance for two decades. It was natural for Dodonna to be alarmed by this unexpected and most unusual set of circumstances. He would have no way of knowing that the man who had once been known as Darth Vader no longer existed.

“You needn’t be concerned, General,” Kenobi said at last. ‘There is no connection between Vader and Luke and Leia,’ he said, using the Force to manipulate the man’s mind. “In fact, you were mistaken when you thought Vader had once been Anakin Skywalker. What you heard was wrong, and you have no reason to think otherwise.”

Dodonna looked at Kenobi, puzzled for a moment by the momentary lapse he’d had in his line of thinking. “What... what was I saying?” he asked after a moment.

“You were telling me about the problems you were having with adapting the sensors to the cold, General,” Obi-Wan reminded him gently.

“Oh, oh yes,” Dodonna said. He scratched at his beard, still puzzled by his inability to remember what he was saying. “I think I’ll go and see how things are coming along.”

“Good idea,” Obi-Wan said, pleased with his ability to erase the memory of Darth Vader’s true identity from the general’s mind. It had been an error in judgment to tell him that in the first place, one for which Obi-Wan took full responsibility. *The last thing Luke and Leia need right now is their own commanding officers doubting their loyalties*, he reflected as he made his way to the mess hall for a much needed cup of tea.

Naboo-Naberrie home

Anakin took a long shower, his mind working through all that had transpired in the past twenty-four hours. It was clear that Padmé’s memory was starting to return now that the Tharandon therapy had been discontinued. His fears of the drug’s long term affects upon his wife had been, thankfully, unrealized. She *would* regain her memory, he was certain of it now.

So what do I do now? He thought as he let the hot water cascade over his shoulders. *Do I let her remember what I did to her on her own, or do I tell her myself? What if she never remembers? Can I live with myself letting her go on without knowing?* He knew that it was only a matter of time before Padmé started asking more probing questions about her past; why she had ended up on Naboo, what had happened to separate her from her family, why she

had lost her memory. How could any of those questions be answered without telling her the whole, ugly truth? Clearly what happened on Mustafar was intrinsically connected with Padmé's fate; and it would be unfair not to tell her everything, *even if it means she wants nothing to do with me ever again.*

Anakin turned off the water and stepped out of the shower, his mind no more at ease than when he had begun his shower.

Padmé was just tidying up the kitchen when Anakin entered the room.

"Good morning," he told her.

She looked up at him and smiled. "Good morning," she said. "Are you hungry?"

"Yes," he replied. "Starving in fact."

"Good," she said. "I put together a plate for you," she said, handing him a plate laden with breakfast delectables.

"Thanks," he said, taking the plate from her hands. He looked at it; it looked delicious. "Did you make this?" he asked, knowing full well she hadn't.

"No, Mom did before she went out," Padmé told him. "I'm afraid I don't remember much about cooking."

Anakin smiled to himself as he sat down at the table, remembering the many times he'd teased her about her cooking. Padmé noticed the smile on his face, and sat down with him. "What?" she asked.

He looked up at her. "Excuse me?" he asked innocently.

"Something has obviously struck you as amusing," she said as she watched him eat his breakfast. "Are you going to tell me what it is?"

"I'm not sure you want to know," he told her with a smile. "You might get upset with me."

"Try me," Padmé replied.

Anakin laughed. "Okay....well; it's just that what you said about not remembering much about cooking kind of struck me as...well, ironic."

"And why is that?" she asked.

"Uh... be... cause you never did know how to cook," he said, the words all coming out at once.

"I beg your pardon?" she said, frowning at him. "What are you trying to say, Anakin?"

Anakin sighed. "Padmé, my love, you are a woman of many talents," he told her. "But I'm afraid cooking was never one of them."

"You mean I can't cook?" she asked.

Anakin shook his head.

"I've *never* been able to cook?"

Anakin shook his head again. “No, though you did make many valiant attempts,” he told her.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” she said. “So tell me something, how did such a big strapping man like yourself manage to survive with substandard cooking?” she asked with a smile.

“Well, you only cooked on occasion,” he told her.

“Lucky for you,” she said.

Anakin laughed. “I’m sorry, Angel— but you did ask.”

“And I want to know, Anakin,” she said. “I want to know everything, not just the happy things.”

Anakin nodded. “I know you do,” he said. “What do you say we contact Luke and Leia? I know they are anxious to see you.”

Padmé’s face immediately lit up with a radiant smile. “Yes, that’s a wonderful idea,” she said. “I can’t wait to see them too. I just know seeing them will trigger something, Anakin.”

Anakin didn’t have the heart to tell her that she had not seen Luke and Leia since they were minutes old. It was highly unlikely that seeing them now, as adults, would trigger any memories within her mind; yet, stranger things had happened. Perhaps the bond that existed between a mother and her children would be enough to elicit some miraculous reaction.

“I hope so,” Anakin said, standing up. ‘Come on,’ he said, holding his hand out to her. “Let’s go see them now.”

Padmé paced up and down in the parlor as Anakin made contact with the Millennium Falcon. She was excited at the thought of seeing her children; but nervous as well. *What if they resent me for being absent from their life for so long? What if they have no place for me now in their lives? What if...*

“Come here, Angel.”

Anakin’s voice interrupted her anxious musings, and she turned to him. She walked over to where he was sitting, her heart pounding within her. He stood up, motioning for her to sit down. She took the seat, and looked at the screen, her throat constricting when she beheld the two faces on the screen.

“Hello Mother,” Leia said with a smile. “It’s wonderful to see you!”

Leia looks like me, Padmé reflected, taking in every detail of her daughter’s face. “Hello Leia,” she said softly, her eyes brimming with tears. She turned her eyes to her son next. “Hello Luke.”

Luke smiled at her. “It’s so good to see you, Mother,” he said. “We’ve waited a long time for this moment.”

Padmé nodded. “I know you have,” she said. ‘I’m so sorry,’ she began, not even knowing what to say to them. “I’m... so sorry I haven’t been there for you...”

“Mother, don’t blame yourself for what happened!” Leia cried, quite shocked by Padmé’s apology. “You have nothing to apologize for!”

Anakin stood behind Padmé, his heart aching as he sensed his wife's sorrow. He put his hands on her shoulders protectively, wishing he could take away all the pain he knew was deep inside her.

"We want to see you, Mother," Luke said. "We know right now it isn't possible, but nothing would mean more to us."

"I want to see you too," Padmé replied her voice little more than a whisper. "My beautiful babies... I've missed so much, so many years... I've missed everything..."

Anakin was beginning to think that this was a bad idea, that Padmé was not ready for this; and yet, if she were to truly be healed, then she must face the pain of her past, no matter how difficult.

"We will make up for all those years, Mother," Leia averred, her own eyes, so much like her mother's, shining with tears. "The four of us."

Padmé could only nod in response, her emotions too overwhelming to allow her to speak right away. "I want that more than anything," she said at last, the tears streaming down her face. "I only hope that in time I will remember you," she looked up at Anakin. "All of you."

"You will, Mother," Luke averred. "We will help you, all three of us."

Padmé nodded. "Thank you, Luke," she said. "Thank you both, for not resenting me for being absent from your life for so long."

Luke and Leia looked up at their father, knowing how difficult this was for him, sensing the tremendous shame and guilt he felt over what had truly happened to their mother.

"The past can never be erased," Leia said, looking at her father still. "But that doesn't mean a future isn't full of wonderful potential. Let's focus on the future, Mother, a future when the four of us can be together the way we should have been all along."

Anakin was moved by his daughter's words, astonished by the depth of her love and her ability to forgive. He smiled at her, loving her utterly.

"I'm afraid we have to go," Luke said. "They have put power restrictions on all of us recently since the generator we installed is having such trouble adapting to the cold."

Padmé nodded her understanding. "I hope we will see one another very soon," she said.

"We will," Leia said, smiling at her mother. "Goodbye, Mother, goodbye Father— take care of one another."

"We will," Anakin replied. "You and Luke do the same."

"You bet," Luke said, smiling at his parents. They both waved goodbye as their image faded out of view.

Padmé sat for a moment, too shaken to speak. Anakin was concerned about her silence, and looked down at her. "Are you alright, Angel?" he asked.

Padmé turned and looked up at him, her dark eyes full of a thousand different emotions. "They are so beautiful," she said softly, a smile upon her lips.

Anakin nodded. "They are," he said, touching her face gently. "They are remarkable, Padmé, both of them. I think they inherited the best of both of us."

"I think so too," she said. "I can't wait to meet them in person. When can we do that?"

Anakin hesitated, not knowing what to tell her. "Soon," he told her as she stood up. "Very soon, I promise."

"Thank you," she said, standing up. "That would mean a lot to me. There's something else I've been thinking about," she told him.

"What is that?" he asked as they walked away from the comm. screen.

"I was thinking that... maybe going up to the lake retreat would be a good idea," she said, "that maybe it would help me to remember. Now that I know my memory is coming back, being there will speed up the process."

Anakin nodded. "I think so too," he told her. "We can go as soon as you're ready, Padmé."

"Thank you Anakin," she said. 'You have been so wonderful through all this,' she said, turning to him and touching his face. "I don't know what would have become of me if you hadn't come back into my life when you did."

Anakin smiled. He took her hand and kissed it softly, the irony of her statement too bittersweet to contemplate. "Come on," he said. "It's going to take you all day to pack all those new clothes your sister bought you," he teased her.

Padmé laughed, and let him lead her back to her room.

Chapter 33

Chapter 33

Leia tried to sleep, but sleep was hard to come by these days. The bitter cold permeated the massive center that the Rebels had built, despite their best efforts to insulate it. She had been accustomed to living in comfort. Having to wear clothes in layers just to avoid frostbite was something she was not accustomed to. Yet, she had made the choice to stay with the Alliance, a choice which she did not regret. She was tough, after all, she was a Skywalker; so she put up with the cold, accepted that she needed to wear multiple layers of clothing in order to get warm enough just to fall asleep. This night, however, the cold was not the main reason for her inability to sleep.

She had met her mother earlier that day. Meeting her should have been a happy, joyous event; but instead it had only served to add to the already considerable animosity Leia felt towards her adoptive father.

Bail Organa had tried several times over the past few days to contact Leia, but she had not responded to him. The resentment she felt towards him was bitter indeed. Not only had she herself been deprived of the presence of her real mother in her life, but her mother had spent the past twenty years in lonely isolation, the victim of a corrupt opportunist who had taken advantage of her condition to fatten his own portfolio. And that was something she couldn't forgive.

Leia turned over onto her side, wrapping her arms tightly around her self, trying to get warm. The image of her mother's face would not leave her mind. She could not get over how much she looked like her mother; she felt as though she were looking at herself sometime in the future. *She has no idea what happened to Father*, Leia reflected. *She had no knowledge of Darth Vader, or Mustafar, or any of the dark days that helped define her existence for the past two decades.* Leia worried how her mother would react when she did find out; would it result in a relapse? And what of Leia and Luke's father? Would he lose his angel again once she learned the truth? The depth of the love her father bore her mother staggered Leia; he had sacrificed so much for her. How would he bear it if she pushed him away now? Would it drive him into the Darkness once again? *I cannot lose my father again... I won't lose him again, no matter what.*

Naboo-Naberrie home

Jobal returned to her home to find her younger daughter in an uncommonly good mood. Padmé told her mother all about having met Luke and Leia, and how she had decided to go to the lake retreat with Anakin. Jobal was relieved to hear that Padmé was beginning to accept Anakin, that she trusted him and was willing to spend time alone with him in an attempt to remember her past life with him.

It was evening before all the preparations had been made for the journey into the Lake District, and so Anakin and Padmé decided to put it off until the next morning, reasoning that they did not wish to be traveling such a great distance in the dark.

Part of the preparation for the voyage entailed a trip into town to buy some provisions. Ryoo took the day off from work to take her aunt and grandmother into town. Anakin was amazed that Padmé felt compelled to buy *more* clothes. It seemed that she was becoming more like her old self again.

Padmé found Anakin puttering around in the garage when she returned. He looked up from his tinkering when she entered the garage.

“Did you leave anything in the shop?” he asked her with a grin.

“A few things,” she replied with a smile.

“Very considerate of you,” he teased. He looked down at the half assembled droid he’d been working on. “I wonder what happened to this poor fellow,” he said.

Padmé looked at the droid, an image of it helping her mother in the kitchen jumping to her mind.

“I... I remember it,” she said at last.

Anakin looked at her. “Really?” he said. “What do you remember?”

“Not much; I just remember seeing it in the kitchen... it was helping my mother. I was very young at the time I think.”

Anakin nodded. “That makes sense,” he replied. “It was probably a protocol droid. Threepio helped my mother in the kitchen on occasion.”

“Threepio?”

“A protocol droid I built for my mother,” he explained, “to help her.”

“You *built* a droid?” Padmé asked in amazement.

Anakin nodded. “I was always rather good at building and fixing things,” he replied.

“Yes, obviously,” she responded. “Does she still have Threepio? Your mother?”

Anakin looked down at the droid, as the image of his mother’s face as she lay dying in his arms came to mind. “My mother died many years ago,” he told her.

“Oh... I’m sorry,” Padmé replied awkwardly. “I had no idea.”

Anakin looked up at his wife. “Don’t apologize,” he said. “You didn’t know. It was a long time ago, before we were even married.”

Padmé nodded her understanding. “How did she die?”

Anakin sighed, willing himself to be strong as he recalled the horrific events that lead up to the death of his mother. “She was captured by Tusken Raiders,” he told her. “Savage, nomadic beasts that are indigenous to my home world. I wasn’t there to help her, to save her, not until it was too late to do so. They held her as their prisoner for weeks. She died in my arms minutes after I found her.”

“Oh, Ani,” she said softly, her heart aching for him. “That’s so...”

Anakin looked at her suddenly. “What did you call me?”

“What?” she asked. “I... I called you...”

“You called me Ani,” he told her. “You called me Ani!”

“I did?” she asked, not understanding the significance of what she had done.

Anakin nodded, a smile spreading across his face. “Yes,” he told her. “You did. It’s the nickname you and my mother called me. No one else ever called me that, so there’s no way you could have heard it from someone. You’re starting to remember, Padmé, there’s no doubt of it.”

Padmé smiled. “I can’t believe it,” she said. “For twenty years I haven’t been able to remember anything, and in the past few days the memories been returning steadily. It’s incredible!”

“It’s because you stopped those meds,” he reminded her. “That was what repressed your memory, Padmé.”

“I know,” she replied. “What I don’t understand is why. Why did Palo want my memory repressed? What advantage did it give him?”

“He wanted you to be dependent upon him,” Anakin replied, “so that you would let him control you, and your money.”

Padmé was silent as she considered this. “Anakin, what caused me to lose my memory?” she asked. “What happened to me?”

Anakin had known that it was only a matter of time before she asked him the question; and yet he still had no idea how to respond to it. There was no simple answer, no easy way to explain what had happened to her, not without telling her the whole ugly story, not without telling her about Mustafar. And while Anakin planned to do just that, he felt that it was too soon; she was not strong enough yet to know the whole truth. Yet, she needed some sort of explanation, and he was not about to leave her in the dark. After all, the past twenty years of her life had been defined by what had happened to her on Polis Massa.

“You nearly died, Padmé,” he told her at last. “You had a very difficult time giving birth to Luke and Leia, and the complications you suffered from the trauma caused you to slip into a coma. The doctors did not think you would survive. You were in that coma for almost two weeks, and when you awoke, you had no memory of where you were, what had happened, or your previous life.”

Padmé felt as though all the warmth had fled her body. Anakin was startled by the look in her eyes, and reached out to steady her. “Are you alright?” he asked gently, reproaching himself for telling her too much too soon.

“I think so,” she replied. “So Luke and Leia... what happened to them? If I did not remember them, how did I care for them?”

Anakin sighed. “You didn’t,” he told her. “You left Polis Massa shortly after you awoke from the coma, and came here. Palo found you in Theed, and brought you to his facility, where you spent the past twenty years.”

“But the twins?” she asked, desperate for answers, and yet afraid to know them. “What happened to my babies? I left them? How could I just leave them?”

"You didn't leave them, Padmé," he told her gently. "As I said, the doctors thought you were never going to survive, and they allowed the twins to be taken by people whom you had known and trusted. They were raised by good people, Padmé; people who loved them and protected them."

This brought her some comfort, but it was insignificant compared to the dull ache in her heart caused by the knowledge that she had never had a hand in raising her children. "So even if I had never lost my memory, I would have no memory of my own children," she said quietly. "Just their birth, and then....nothing."

"I'm so sorry, Padmé," Anakin said, holding her arms gently. "I know this is very difficult for you to hear; perhaps I should have waited to tell you."

Padmé shook her head. "No," she replied. 'I need to know, Ani,' she said. "I won't live like this any more. I must know what happened, even if it is painful to hear."

Anakin nodded his understanding. *Will you feel the same way Padmé when I tell you the rest of the story?*

"Let's go inside," he said. "It's starting to rain again. You can show me your new acquisitions," he suggested, trying to lighten her mood.

"I'm not really up to it right now," she told him as they walked towards the house.

Anakin could sense that what he had told her had made her extremely upset. And it was not just what he had told her that bothered her, but rather what he had not told her.

"Okay," he said at last. "Do you need some help packing" he asked, suddenly feeling awkward with her.

"I think I'll ask my mother to help me finish packing," she said once they were inside. "Thank you anyway."

"Very well," he said, watching her go, his heart heavy as he heard her silent question: *where were you when this was happening, Anakin?*

Padmé headed to her room, barely holding her emotions in check. She sat down on the edge of her bed, her hands trembling from the emotion Anakin's disclosure had elicited.

"Padmé? Are you alright?" Jobal asked, stepping into the room.

Padmé looked up at her mother, the tears filling her eyes. "No," she said softly. "I'm not."

Jobal came over to the bed at once and sat down beside her daughter. "What is it?" she asked. "What's wrong?"

"Anakin told me what happened to me," Padmé told her mother. "He told me what happened when Luke and Leia were born."

"I see," Jobal replied. "That must have been difficult for you to hear."

Padmé shook her head. "I can't believe I missed my children's entire lives," she said. "Why did this happen to me?"

Jobal could sense her anger and frustration, and she put an arm around her shoulder. "Sometimes childbirth is dangerous, Padmé," she explained gently. "Sometimes..."

"No, that's not what I mean," Padmé said, standing up suddenly. She paced around in the room. "Where was Anakin when this was happening to me? Where was my husband, the father of my children when I was going through all that? Why wasn't he there to look after me, to take care of our children?"

"Why didn't you ask him that yourself?" Jobal asked. "It is obviously bothering you."

"Of course it's bothering me!" Padmé exclaimed. "How else should I feel? My husband, who claims to love me, was not there for me when I needed him most!"

"Sit down, Padmé," Jobal suggested. "You need to calm down."

Padmé sat down, her body tense with anger.

"Anakin is a Jedi Knight," Jobal began. "You know this already."

Padmé nodded. "I know," she said. "What has that got to do with this?"

"Everything," Jobal continued. "All of this occurred during the Clone Wars, a terrible conflict that tore the galaxy apart. The Jedi Knights were the only thing that stood between democracy and the tyranny that would eventually triumph over it. Anakin was a great hero, Padmé; they called him The Hero with no Fear, for he was renown throughout the galaxy for his bravery and his skill as a warrior. When you were giving birth to Luke and Leia, he was injured, and nearly died himself. He had no idea what you were going through, Padmé; he was near death himself. And when he awoke, he was told that you had died."

"How do you know all this?" she asked.

"Because he told me," Jobal replied. "When he found out that you were alive, he came looking for you, and his search brought him here."

Padmé felt her anger leaving her, only to be replaced with a feeling of utter sadness. "I had no idea," she said softly. "So it seems he has lost as much as I have."

Jobal nodded. "Yes, I think he has," she agreed.

The terrible sense of loss was overwhelming, and it rendered Padmé speechless for a moment.

"Think of it this way," Jobal suggested, taking Padmé's hand. "You found one another. Yes, the past twenty years have slipped away, and can never be brought back. But you have one another now, you have your children. Perhaps it is time to focus on the future rather than the past."

Padmé nodded. "I need to talk to him," she said, feeling badly for her coldness earlier. "I was rather abrupt with him earlier."

Jobal nodded. "He is a patient man," she observed. "He will understand."

"I hope so," Padmé replied, standing up. She looked down at her mother. "Thanks Mom," she said.

Jobal smiled as she watched Padmé leave the room. “What are mother’s for?”

Chapter 34

Chapter 34

Anakin found himself walking through the village, trying to sort out his thoughts. The pouring rain did not deter him—he barely noticed it, his mind was in such turmoil. *If this is how she reacts to learn about what happened on Polis Massa, what will happen when she learns about Mustafar? Am I only fooling myself thinking that she will ever be able to forgive me for what I did to her on that day? Should I just walk away now and spare her the trouble of pushing me away?* He knew that in time the memories would return. They already were returning; it was only a matter of time before Mustafar came back to her as well. *Am I foolish to think that those memories will do anything but make her resent and reject me?*

Night was falling by the time Anakin found his way back to the Nabberrie home. Although he had worn his hooded cloak, it had afforded him little protection against the rain, and he was soaked to the skin.

The house was dark when he returned, and he reasoned that the ladies of the household had gone to bed. He entered the house as quietly as he could, and took off his cloak, hanging it on one of the hooks near the door. He pulled off his boots, not wanting to track water through the house, and made his way through the dark house towards his bedroom.

Pulling his drenched clothing off, he found himself shivering. He proceeded to the fresher and turned on the hot water for a shower. Standing under the cascade of warm water, he ran his hands through his hair, the anxiety filling him. *If only I knew what to do*, he thought uneasily. *If only there was an easy solution...*

Padmé had been unable to fall asleep, and when she heard the sound of water running, realized that Anakin had returned. She had been disappointed to find him gone earlier, for she wanted very much to speak to him, to apologize for her shortness earlier.

She got out of her bed and walked to the door, hesitating for a moment. *Maybe he won't want to talk to me, maybe he's angry with me for the way I reacted earlier...* She reasoned that even if he were, she could not ignore him; he at least deserved an apology. Opening her door, she stepped out into the dark corridor. Tentatively she knocked on the door to Anakin's room. There was no answer. *He doesn't want to see me...* she thought. *He is angry...*

She turned to return to her room, when she heard his door open.

"Padmé?"

She turned back to see Anakin standing in the doorway. His hair was wet, he was shirtless, and a towel was draped around his shoulders. It was obvious that he had just stepped out of the shower.

"I... I hope I'm not disturbing you," she said.

Anakin shook his head, trying to determine what was on her mind. "You're not," he said. "Come in."

Padmé hesitated for a moment, and then stepped into the room. Anakin watched her as he rubbed his wet hair with the towel. “Something on your mind?” he asked.

Padmé turned back to him. “Yes,” she said. “I wanted to apologize.”

Anakin frowned. “What for?”

“I was rather abrupt with you earlier,” she replied. “And I had no right to be, and I’m sorry.”

Anakin was surprised by her apology. “You don’t need to apologize, Padmé,” he told her as he draped the towel over the back of the chair. “You had every right to be upset.”

“But not with you,” she replied. “I had no right to be.”

“Padmé, please..” he began, the irony of her apology too much for him.

“Please let me finish,” she said. ‘I was feeling angry because you weren’t there when the twins were born,’ she explained. “And I was feeling resentful. But I know now that there was no way you could have been there, no way you could have prevented what had happened.”

“And how do you know that?” he asked.

“My mother told me,” she explained. “She told me how you’d been away at war when Luke and Leia were born, and how you’d been seriously wounded in battle. I had no idea, Anakin... and I’m sorry for thinking the worst of you.”

Wounded in battle... he reflected. *That isn’t so far from the truth, is it?*

“You needn’t apologize,” he told her again, taking her gently by the shoulders. “My place should have been with you, Padmé, no matter what. If I could go back and change what happened, I would. I...”

“Anakin, nothing can change the past,” she interjected. “No matter how much we want to change what happened, there is no way to do so. And as much as I need to remember the past, I don’t think we ought to live in it. Life is too short to have so many regrets.”

Anakin nodded. “Yes, it is,” he agreed. “So where do we go from here?”

“The lake retreat,” she replied. “Unless you’ve changed your mind.”

“No, I haven’t changed my mind,” he said. “Although I wondered if perhaps you had.”

She shook her head. “No, I haven’t. It seems to me that we had something rather special, you and I. I’d like to try and remember it.”

“Remember it?” he asked. “Or recapture it?”

Padmé was taken aback by his candor, and felt her face grow warm under his discerning eyes. The fact that he looked and smelled wonderful didn’t make her any more comfortable.

“Is that what you want?” she asked softly.

“Do you even need to ask me that?” he asked with a smile. “You are a part of me, Padmé, you always have been. I want nothing more than to have my soul mate back, for that is what you are to me, Padmé, my soul mate.”

Padmé smiled, the depth of the love he felt for her astonishing and even frightening her a little.

“The question is, Padmé,” he said, taking her face in his hands. “Is that what *you* want?”

Padmé wasn’t sure how to respond. Her mind was telling her to be rational, to be logical; was it wise to jump into something blindly? Yet she could not ignore the way she felt when she was with him, the attraction that she had been unable to deny from the moment he had first appeared in her life. But it was not just physical attraction that she felt; there was a connection between them that went beyond the physical chemistry between a man and a woman. It was as though they were destined to be together, as though they were...soul mates.

Anakin looked into her dark eyes, trying to read what was in her heart. He knew that she was confused, despite the attraction he knew she felt towards him. As difficult as it was for him, he knew that he needed to be patient with her, that to push her at this point would be a mistake. She knew how he felt; now it was up to her to decide how she felt.

“I don’t know what I want,” she finally admitted. “I don’t know what to think; I am still so confused, so lost.”

“I know,” he said. “But perhaps you ought to rely on your heart, Padmé. What does your heart tell you?”

Padmé responded by taking his face in her hands and pulling him down to her. Anakin was surprised by her move, even more so when he felt her mouth upon his.

A myriad of emotions, a flood of fleeting images bombarded Padmé as she kissed her husband for the first time in twenty years. But one thing, one feeling predominated: it felt right.

As for Anakin, he felt as though he would awaken and find that he had been having a wonderful dream. To be able to hold his wife in his arms again, to kiss her again seemed impossible; and yet, here she was. Even more remarkable still was the fact that she had been the one to initiate their first physical contact in two decades. But despite this fact, Anakin knew that he could not give full vent to the feelings her kiss was evoking within him. The longing he felt her had not subsided in the twenty years that he was without her, and now that she was back in his life, back in his arms, it was only augmented a thousand fold. Yet, as difficult as it would be, he was determined not to push her. She was still so fragile, despite the enormous gains she had made.

“That was beautiful,” Anakin said as he held her face in his hands. It had been he who had ended the kiss, something he could honestly not ever remember doing before.

Padmé nodded. “It was,” she said. For a moment they merely stood in silence, looking at one another, the tension between them almost palpable. “Perhaps I should let you get to sleep,” she said at last.

“Yes, we need to get an early start,” he said, releasing her at once. She took a step back to put some distance between them. “Well, goodnight,” she said.

“Goodnight,” he replied. He stood and watched her leave. When the door had closed behind her, he sat down on the edge of the bed. He ran his hands through his still damp hair, knowing that it would a long time indeed before he was able to sleep that night.

Sixth planet of the Hoth System

“That’s right, Leia; let go, use the Force.”

Leia nodded and gripped the lightsaber tighter. She had been using Obi-Wan’s weapon, since they had no materials to make her own. Obi-Wan was very impressed with Leia’s skills; she had caught up to Luke in very short order. When the two of them sparred, it was difficult to decide who the victor was. *Anakin will be very pleased with their progress*, he reflected as he watched Luke and Leia. *They are strong... very strong. Palpatine must never find them.*

The Skywalker twins circled one another, using the Force to anticipate the move of the other. Although Leia had the disadvantage of being much smaller than her twin, she made up for it with passion. Her brow was furrowed with concentration as she worked to parry her brother’s attacks. *She is so much like her father*, Obi-Wan reflected. *The same passion, the same stubbornness.* He worried that these same personality traits might make her more prone to the temptations of the Dark Side. With all the adversity that she was dealing with in her life right now, Obi-Wan needed to make sure that Leia’s progress was monitored closely, and that as she learned to use the Force, she was not tempted to succumb to the same temptations that had destroyed her father. It concerned Obi-Wan that Leia had refused to talk to her adoptive father, her anger towards him was tremendous, and it had Obi-Wan worried.

“I think that’s enough for today,” Obi-Wan said at last. “Tomorrow we’ll go over that new stance again.”

Luke and Leia were not disappointed that their master had ended the session. It was grueling work, particularly when their training sessions were tacked onto the end of an already exhausting day. Still, both considered it the best part of the day, and looked forward to it avidly.

“May I have a word with you, Leia?” Obi-Wan asked as she and Luke prepared to leave the small makeshift gymnasium.

“Of course,” Leia replied. “What is on your mind, Obi-Wan?”

“You are,” Obi-Wan responded. “I’m concerned about you, Leia.”

Leia frowned. “Why?” she asked simply. “I thought you said my training was progressing very well.”

“And it is,” Obi-Wan assured her. “I am very pleased, very impressed with your dedication and your abilities, Leia. Your father will be very proud.”

Leia smiled at this. “I miss him,” she said. “I hope we can meet our mother soon.”

“Yes, I’m sure she wishes the same thing,” Obi-Wan replied. “Tell me, Leia, do you also miss your other father? Your adoptive father?”

Leia frowned. “No,” she replied flatly. “I don’t.”

Obi-Wan did not need to be Force sensitive to know that she was lying. “Are you being completely honest with yourself, Leia?” he asked gently. “For I sense that you seem rather uncertain.”

Leia looked at him. “He lied to me, Obi-Wan,” she told him, her dark eyes full of anger. “He deprived me of the chance to know my real mother, and left her to rot in that medical center for twenty years! I will never forgive him for that.”

Obi-Wan nodded. “It is understandable that you would feel angry about being deprived of seeing your mother,” he conceded. “But be certain that you are not misplacing the blame for that.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that if you were to give Bail Organa the chance, I’m sure he would explain his motivation. He loves you Leia, as much as if you were his flesh and blood. Have you given him a chance to tell you his side of the story?” Obi-Wan asked.

Leia turned away. She did not want to hear his side— it may deprive her of her self-righteous anger. She needed that anger; it made the pain of spending a lifetime away from her true parents and her twin brother a little easier to bear. Anger meant protection, it shielded her from heartache.

“No,” she said at last. “I haven’t. I don’t want to hear anything he has to say.”

Obi-Wan frowned, shaking his head. “I sense great anger in you, Leia,” he told her. “Anger leads to the Dark Side. You are so much like your father; you cannot dare risk allowing that anger to fester within you. You must let go of it, you must speak to Organa.”

Leia frowned but did not respond. “I don’t need him,” she said. “I have a father, my real father. I have no place in my life for a second one.”

“Leia, surely you can see what an illogical point of view that is,” he told her. “Bail Organa raised you; he nurtured you and protected you like his very own child. Surely you don’t mean to say that means nothing to you.”

Leia was beginning to waver, and Obi-Wan could sense it. “Surely you have enough love in your heart for both of your fathers.”

The constriction that had begun to form in Leia’s throat prevented her from speaking. Under Obi-Wan’s unwavering discernment, she could feel her anger giving way to grief, to shame, and to regret.

Obi-Wan sensed what she was feeling, and put a comforting hand on her shoulder. “Why don’t you try to reach your father on Alderaan?” he suggested gently. “I’m sure he would be most pleased to hear from you.”

Leia nodded, brushing an errant tear away. “I know he would,” she said quietly. She looked up at Obi-Wan. “Thank you,” she said. “Thank you for helping me see my way through my anger.”

“You are my padawan, Leia,” Obi-Wan reminded her with a smile. “It is my job to do so.”

Leia smiled, and then gave Obi-Wan a hug. “I know, but thank you all the same.”

Obi-Wan watched with a smile as she ran out of the gymnasium, pleased that, in some respects, Leia Skywalker was more like her mother than her father.

Naboo-Naberrie home

Padmé found herself walking in a field of long grass and wildflowers. High above her, the summer sun shone brightly in the cloudless sky. From where she stood she could see a magnificent waterfall, its rushing waters casting up spray for several meters into the air.

She turned to her companion who walked along side her, a tall, tremendously handsome man with eyes that rivaled the summer sky in their intense shade of blue. He smiled at her, and took her hand in his as they walked through the tall grass. She felt her heart skip a beat when he smiled at her. He was her world, her soul mate, her lover and her best friend; her Ani. Their time together was always so short, but they always made the most of it, the passion between them unquenchable.

As they walked along, the grass gradually gave way to a marsh, as the waters from the nearby river encroached upon the land. It began to get difficult to walk, each step she took increasing in difficulty.

“Ani, let’s get away from here,” Padmé said, starting to grow fearful that they would be trapped. “We can’t go any further.”

“Sure we can,” he said. ‘This way,’ he said, venturing off in a different direction. “Are you coming?”

Padmé shook her head. “No, Ani, I don’t want to go that way — there’s no way out.”

But Anakin would not listen, and continued into the quagmire, not heeding his wife’s warnings. Soon he was almost out of her sight, and she began to panic. “Anakin, where are you?” she called. He did not answer, and so she called louder. “Anakin!”

She ventured forward, swallowing her fear. Anakin needed her, she felt certain of it. She continued to call him, scanning the horizon for him. And then she saw him. “Anakin!” she cried. He was trapped in the quagmire up to his waist.

“Ani!” she cried. ‘Hold on!’ She tried to get to him, but she could not get to him in time. He was disappearing before her very eyes. She was too late; she was not fast enough to help him. “Anakin!!” she screamed, “Anakin!”

Anakin awoke to the sound of his wife calling his name. He sat up immediately, his heart pounding in his chest. Did I dream that? he wondered as he listened intently for the sound of her voice. When he heard it again, he jumped out of bed and ran out of the room.

Padmé was tossing and turning in her sleep when he burst into her room. She was still crying his name when he reached her bedside and took her by the shoulders.

“Padmé, wake up!” he implored, shaking her gently. “Wake up!”

Padmé opened her eyes, and looked around the room, which was still dark save for the light that came in through the open door. She looked up at Anakin, and seeing his face, made the connection to the dream she’d just had, the dream that she’d had more times over the past twenty years than she could recall. “Ani,” she said softly. “You’re alright!”

“Yes, I’m...” he stopped as she threw her arms around his neck and held him tightly. He was surprised, but returned her embrace, holding her gently, stroking her long hair against her back. “I’m okay, Padmé, I’m fine.”

She did not reply, but merely held him tightly, as though afraid to let him go. Anakin could feel her trembling in his arms. Was this the dream that had haunted her all these years? The one that Palo had tried hard to repress? *She was dreaming of me...* Anakin told himself. *She was dreaming of me, that's why that bastard wanted it to stop, that's why he wanted her dreams repressed.*

"It's okay, Angel," he said soothingly. "It was just a dream."

Padmé finally pulled back and looked at his face. She ran her hands over it, as though convincing herself that he was real. "You're okay," she said at last as she started to calm down. "You're safe!"

Anakin nodded. "Of course," he told her.

"I thought I'd lost you," she told him. "In my dream...I lost you. I tried to help you but I was too late... you were gone..." she stopped as the memories of the dream filled her mind once again.

"You haven't lost me," he assured her. "I'm right here, I am not going anywhere. I promise you, Angel; I swear to you."

Padmé nodded, believing him and yet still shaken by the dream.

"Just hold me, Anakin," she said softly, her eyes filling with tears again. "Please."

Anakin pulled her to him, holding her tightly as she buried her face against his neck. *I will never leave again, Padmé,* he vowed silently. *Never. I am yours and you are mine, now and forever.*

Chapter 35

Chapter 35

Eventually Padmé drifted off to sleep again, safe in the comforting embrace of her husband. Anakin gently laid her down, trapping his arm under her in the process. He tried to free it without waking her up; but as soon as he did so, she began to stir again, as though in protest. Anakin finally gave in, and simply lay down beside her. Padmé turned to him and snuggled against him. Anakin felt himself grow tense as she did so, for this was not at all what he expected. He was intoxicated by the closeness of her body, the scent of her, the feeling of her soft face against his bare chest. *This is torture*, he thought as he closed his eyes. He needed every ounce of strength he possessed to remain unaffected by the proximity of her body. Summoning the Force, he calmed himself and, within a short time, he was asleep, his chin resting on top of his wife's head.

When Padmé awoke the next morning, she was quite surprised to find herself in the embrace of her husband. And then she remembered the nightmare. It had returned, just as Anakin had predicted it would. But this time he had been there to comfort her, to chase away the terrifying images and assure her that they were not real.

Padmé turned and looked at Anakin as he slept, his strong, handsome features relaxed and peaceful. She reached out and gently stroked his face. *What is the significance of this dream?* She wondered as she examined his face. *Why have I dreamed the same thing so many times? Is there some truth to it? Is this a memory that is too terrible for me to remember consciously?*

Extricating herself from Anakin's embrace, Padmé got out of the bed. She looked back to ensure that her husband was still asleep, and then went to the fresher to have a shower.

Anakin woke up alone, and was rather discombobulated for a moment in the unfamiliar room. He sat up when he remembered the nightmare that Padmé had experienced. She was not in the room, however, and he listened to determine if she was in the fresher. It was quiet, and so he reasoned that she was already up and had left the room. *What time is it?* he wondered as he got out of bed. He stretched his arms above his head, smiling as he remembered how wonderful it was to have his wife in his arms the previous night. Granted, the circumstances weren't exactly typical, but it had been a taste of heaven sleeping with her nestled up to him just as she had for so many nights before the Darkness had claimed him.

Just then the door opened, and Anakin looked over to see Padmé entering the room.

"You're up," she said with a smile. "I was just coming to wake you."

"What time is it?" he asked.

"It's past ten," she said. "You said you wanted to get an early start, remember?"

Anakin nodded. "Yes, so much for that," he said. "I'll just get dressed and we can be on our way."

“Not without breakfast,” she reminded him. “We’re not in that much of a hurry.”

“Yes, milady,” he replied with a smile, her protective attitude reminiscent of earlier days.

Padmé shook her head with a smile. “Were you always this cheeky?” she asked.

“Absolutely,” he replied. “I’m not sure how you put up with me sometimes.”

Padmé laughed. “Go on and get dressed,” she said. “Mom has made a lovely breakfast, so you won’t have to worry about my cooking.”

Anakin was about to reply, but thought better of it, and simply went across the hall to get dressed.

Alderaan — Royal Palace

Bail Organa stood at the window of his office, staring out at the darkening sky. He had duties to attend to, appointments to keep; but he was finding it difficult to get motivated to do anything these days. *I miss my daughter*; he thought despondently. *I miss my little girl*.

The fact that Leia had discovered her true paternity was still shocking to Bail; in fact, he was not even entirely certain how it had happened. He had made sure that Leia was raised to mistrust and even revile Darth Vader and all that he stood for; how was it that now she accepted the Dark Lord as her father? *And rejects me??* It did not make any sense to him, and Leia was seemingly not about to explain her rationale. Indeed, it seemed as though she was never planning on speaking to Organa again. His numerous attempts to contact her had been ignored. *Damn you Vader*, he thought angrily, *what sort of a sorcerer’s spell have you cast on my daughter?* But Leia was *his* daughter, Vader’s daughter. *Vader and Padmé Amidala’s daughter*.

“Excuse me, Viceroy.”

Organa turned away from the window to look at his assistant. “Yes?”

“I’m sorry to bother you, sir,” she apologized. “But there’s a communication that I think you...”

“I don’t want to talk to anyone right now, Hanna,” he said tiredly. “Tell them to...”

“Sir, it’s your daughter,” she interjected. “It’s the princess.”

Bail was too shocked for a moment to react, and then he did so, by rushing over to his comm. screen. He sat down in front of it and nearly wept with joy to see the face of his daughter on the screen.

“Leia!” he exclaimed, an enormous smile on his face. “I’m so happy to see you! I’ve missed you so much.”

Leia smiled, realizing just how much she had missed him as well. “I’ve missed you too,” she replied. “I... I want to apologize for the way I’ve been acting lately. I’ve been very confused lately, and I’ve taken my frustrations out on you, and I’m sorry.”

“I understand Leia,” he replied. “You’ve had a lot to deal with, and it’s understandable that you’d be confused. May I ask how you found out about him? About Vader?”

"He told me," Leia replied. "When I was being held prisoner on the Death Star, we met for the first time. He knew somehow that I was his child... he sensed it. And once he suspected that, he did everything that he could to protect me."

Organa listened, knowing it was important for Leia to voice her feelings about her real father. "I am grateful to him for that. It seems that perhaps he has changed somewhat."

Leia nodded. "Finding me and Luke has changed him," she averred. "He is no longer Darth Vader; he is not even using that name any more. In fact he is no longer even wearing the mask and breath suit anymore."

Organa frowned. "How is that possible after what happened to him?"

So you knew about Mustafar too, did you? She thought bitterly. "He had massive surgery to repair his injuries," Leia explained. "He is Anakin Skywalker again, in name and in spirit."

"I'm quite shocked to learn all this," Organa replied. "So where is he then? Has he rejoined the Empire?"

Leia frowned. "Of course not!" she replied. "Haven't you heard a word I've said? He has renounced the Dark Side, he is no longer a Sith. He is on Naboo right now. He found my mother."

"Your mother?" Organa asked. "She's alive?"

Leia nodded. "Yes, she's alive," she replied. "You didn't know that?"

"I wasn't sure what had become of her, to tell you the truth," he replied.

Leia was silent for a moment, the offhanded nature of his reply bothering her. "Did you ever try to find out?" she asked.

"How could I have done that without revealing your true identity, Leia?" he asked. "I swore to protect you from Vader, from Palpatine; if they knew that I was snooping around trying to find Padmé they would have realized who you were."

"Perhaps if my father had learned of my existence sooner he would not have lived in darkness for so long," Leia replied. "It has certainly made all the difference in his life now. Not only that, it may have spared my mother a lifetime spent in a mental institution, alone and isolated from her family."

"Padmé has been in a mental institution?" Organa asked in shock.

"Little more than one," Leia replied. "She lost her memory after Luke and I were born, and was found on the streets of Theed alone and lost. My father, who believed her dead all these years, found her and took her out of there. He is hoping that she will regain her memory."

Organa nodded his understanding. *He may regret activating her memory once she recalls what he did to her on Mustafar,* he reflected.

"I wish her well," he said at last. "Have you met her?"

Leia shook her head. "Not in person, no," she said. "But Luke and I are very anxious to. We both feel so cheated that we were deprived of her presence in our lives, that we were deprived of one another in our lives. I'm not sure we will ever get over feeling that way."

Organa sighed. "I know you must resent me for keeping the truth from you, Leia; but you must understand the circumstances in which your late mother and I adopted you. Padmé was dying; Vader had just about killed her, after annihilating the Jedi..."

"I know what happened," Leia cut in. "He has told me everything; you don't need to throw it all in my face."

"That was not my intention," he replied in self defense. "I'm merely trying to explain why things were done the way they were. Everything that was done, every decision that was made was to protect you and Luke. You must understand that, Leia."

Leia sighed, feeling badly for her outburst. "I understand," she replied quietly. "I'm sorry... I don't mean to blame you, or make you feel badly; I suppose I'm just hurting, and sometimes lashing out at someone is the only way to ease that hurt."

Organa nodded. "I know," he replied softly. 'I hope you know how much I love you, Leia,' he said. "I could not love you any more if you were my own flesh and blood. And I know that Anakin...that your father, means a lot to you; I only hope you can find room in your heart for two fathers."

Leia smiled, remembering Obi-Wan's words. "I think I can do that," she said. "I'm glad we had this chance to talk."

"Me too," Organa replied. "Please come home soon, Leia."

Leia nodded. "I will," she replied.

"Please take good care."

"You too."

Organa switched off the screen and sat for a moment, reflecting on the conversation he'd just had with his daughter. While he was relieved she had made peace with him, there was one thing that stuck out in his mind; during the entire conversation, she had not called him Dad, nor Father, nor Daddy, not once. He tried to put it out of his mind, and not attribute any significance to it; but he knew Leia well and knew that she did nothing without a reason. And he knew for a fact that her reason was a certain not quite Sith not quite Jedi by the name of Anakin Skywalker.

Chapter 36

Chapter 36

The sun was starting to set by the time Anakin and Padmé reached the Lake District. Orange and red streaks of fading sunlight settled into the horizon as the gondola made its way across the placid lake waters. Anakin watched his wife as she took in the serene beauty of their surroundings, hoping that they would trigger memories of the many wonderful times they'd shared there. His mind was a tumult of memories, so many wonderful memories of the time they had spent alone here; he had been a mere nineteen years old when he'd escorted Padmé here under the orders of the Jedi Council. The few days that they had spent here had been fraught with angst and frustration as he fought desperately to master the feelings he had for her. And then, a mere few days later, they had returned to this idyllic place and were married in a secret ceremony. This was a happy place, a place that represented the most wonderful part of their life together. It was these memories that he hoped would return to her now. Perhaps if the good memories returned first, the bad ones would be easier to bear. *Perhaps— perhaps they will make the good ones seem irrelevant and meaningless... perhaps they will negate every happy memory we ever shared...*

"It's so beautiful here," Padmé said, turning to Anakin with a smile.

He nodded in response. "Yes, it is," he replied. "This was always one of your favorite places."

"I can see why," she replied, turning back to look at the grand house that was coming into view. "Is that the retreat?" she asked.

"That's it," Anakin said, looking up at the house. "Quite magnificent, isn't it?"

"It certainly is," Padmé replied. She stared hard at the house, as though willing her memory of it to return.

"We were married here, Padmé," Anakin told her.

She turned to him in surprise. "Were we?"

He nodded. "Yes, right up on the terrace. It was about this time of day, too."

Padmé turned back and looked up at the house as it came fully into view. "I wish I could remember that," she said softly.

Anakin put a hand on her shoulder. "You will, Padmé," he assured her. "I'm sure of it."

Servants of the household who had been alerted of their arrival met the gondola as it docked. They took the luggage up to house, leaving Anakin and Padmé alone to make their way to the house at a more leisurely pace.

"This is the spot where we kissed for the first time," Anakin told her as they reached the terrace.

Padmé walked over and rested her hands on the railing. She looked out upon the spectacular vista before her, as though willing herself to remember that momentous occasion. “Tell me about it,” she said to Anakin at last.

Anakin walked over and stood beside her, just as he had on the day so long ago. “Well, you were telling me how much you loved it here,” he began. “How you and your family would come here on school break, and how you and your sister would swim out to the island out there and lay on the sand to dry off in the sun. You liked to guess the names of the birds who were singing. I told you that I didn’t like sand, that it was rough and got everywhere. I remember you were wearing this incredible dress, your entire back was bare, and your arms... I couldn’t take my eyes off of you.”

“So how did this kiss happen?” she asked. “Had we been dating or something?”

Anakin smiled. “No, not exactly,” he replied. “I was assigned to protect you, that was why we were here. As a senator you had made some enemies, and the Jedi Council thought you’d be safer here. I had been in love with you for years, but hadn’t seen you since we were children. Anyway, I suppose it was the dress, or maybe your intoxicating beauty, but we just sort of looked into one another’s eyes, and before we knew it, we were kissing. It was like a taste of heaven,” he told her with a smile.

Padmé smiled too, enchanted by his narrative. “It sounds like you weren’t the only one in love,” she observed.

Anakin laughed. “Well, you weren’t quite as open about your feelings as I was,” he told her. “You were always more level headed than me. You knew how difficult it would be for us to be together, since Jedi were forbidden from having emotional attachments.”

“But we got married after all, despite those restrictions,” she pointed out.

Anakin nodded. “Yes we did,” he said. “We were married right here on this terrace, just down there,” he said, pointing to the corner where they had exchanged their vows more than twenty years earlier. “We had to keep our marriage a secret from everyone, even your family. It wasn’t easy, but we couldn’t deny what we felt for one another.”

Padmé sighed. “That’s quite a love story,” she said. “What a pity the war had to spoil it.”

Anakin did not reply. The war was only a very small part of what had happened to destroy their relationship; it was only the proverbial tip of the iceberg. She was nowhere near ready to learn the truth of what had really befallen them.

“It’s getting dark,” he said at last. “Maybe we should go inside and get settled in.”

“Alright,” she said. She turned to leave with him, and then thought as her ears detected a sound. “Is that...a waterfall I hear?” she asked, unable to see it in the distance because of the twilight.

“Yes it is,” he told her. “There is an enormous one not far from here. Tomorrow we can go up to a place that provides a magnificent view of it if you like.”

A meadow with a waterfall nearby? Padmé thought to herself, startled by what she hoped was mere coincidence. “I would like that very much,” she said at last, deciding she needed to see for herself it this was indeed the place she had dreamed of so many times.

“Good,” Anakin said. “Let’s go inside now,” he said, taking her hand.

Anakin was not sure what sleeping arrangements had been made for them, and felt rather awkward to bring up the subject. Yes, they were married; but theirs was anything but a typical marriage at the moment. And while he would like nothing more than to share his wife’s bed once again, he knew that Padmé was not ready for such a huge step in their relationship. And even if she were, he would not feel right about it, not yet; not until she knew everything. He would not take advantage of the feelings he knew were growing between them, not while there was still so much that she did not know.

“Dinner is ready to be served, milady,” one of the servants informed Padmé as they entered the house.

“Thank you,” Padmé replied. “Hungry?” she asked Anakin.

Anakin nodded. “Always,” he replied with a smile. “Shall we?” he said, offering her his arm.

“By all means,” Padmé replied, taking his arm.

They enjoyed a sumptuous meal, served in grand fashion in the dining room. Anakin had spent so many years being unable to eat real food, that he still savored every morsel of it now that he was able to. So many memories of meals shared together during their honeymoon and then later after his knighthood came to mind as he and Padmé sat together.

“I was thinking that perhaps Luke and Leia could join us here,” Padmé said as they enjoyed their dessert. “I would dearly love to see them.”

Anakin considered her suggestion. “I know how much they want to see you too,” he told her. “I just worry that they may inadvertently reveal the location of the Rebel base were they to leave. The Empire would stop at nothing to destroy their base utterly were they to find it.”

Padmé nodded, understanding and yet disappointed. “You’re right,” she said. “How did it all start, Anakin? This conflict between the Empire and the Rebel Alliance?”

“There have always been those who are opposed to the Empire,” he replied. “Ever since its inception twenty years ago there have been pockets of resistance. Over the years they have banded together and represent a formidable opponent for the Empire.”

“Have you been a part of the Alliance?” she asked.

Not exactly... “No, he told her,” I have not been involved in their activities.”

Padmé sighed. “I feel so out of touch,” she said. “There is so much I don’t know, I don’t remember. Palo kept me very isolated in that place; the only news I heard was what he wanted me to know.”

“That doesn’t surprise me,” Anakin replied sourly. “He wanted to be in complete control of you, Padmé; that included controlling what you knew and didn’t know.”

“I trusted him,” she said, shaking her head ruefully. “I completely trusted him, and yet he used me all along. What kind of a person abuses someone when they are at their most vulnerable?”

“A monster,” Anakin replied, the guilt filling him once again. *Only a monster would attack his pregnant wife who wanted nothing more than to love him, to raise their child with him...*

“You knew him as a child, Padmé,” Anakin told her. “Palo. He was the first one to kiss you.”

“Palo was??” she asked in shock.

Anakin nodded. “You seem rather surprised by that,” he remarked.

“Well, he just never struck me as the....romantic type,” she replied.

Anakin kept his opinion of Palo to himself for the moment.

“I’m just glad he’s out of my life now,” she said. “I can’t imagine what would have happened if you hadn’t arrived when you did, Anakin. I really do owe you my life.”

“You don’t,” he replied, unable to let her go on. “My own life was meaningless and empty without you in it. Finding you has given me back my life, so it is I who owe you my life, Padmé, not the other way around.”

Padmé smiled. “You’re so sweet,” she said, reaching over and putting her hand on his.

Anakin picked her hand up and kissed it tenderly.

“Excuse me, milady.”

Padmé and Anakin looked up to see one of the maid servants.

“We have your suite all prepared for you, milady,” she told.

“Thank you,” Padmé replied. She looked at Anakin. “I hope you remember the way,” she said with a smile.

Anakin nodded as he stood up and pulled Padmé’s chair out for her. “I do,” he said. “This way.”

Entering the room where he and Padmé had spent their wedding night was almost too much for Anakin. The fact that Padmé had no memory of that incredible night made it even more difficult.

“It appears your mother did not fill the staff in on the... particulars of our current relationship,” Anakin said awkwardly as they both stood looking at the large bed in the center of the room.

“No, it doesn’t look that way does it?” Padmé remarked, feeling equally awkward.

“There are plenty of rooms,” Anakin said at last. “I’ll just go to one of them. I don’t want you to be uncomfortable.”

“Thank you,” she said, watching him pick up his bag.

“Goodnight,” he said, facing her once again.

“Goodnight Anakin,” she replied. “Sleep well.”

"So that's a shaak," Anakin say, folding his arms over his chest. "Not nearly as big as I thought they'd be."

"Sorry to disappoint you," I reply, hands on my hips. "I suppose a beast like that is no challenge at all to a Jedi."

He looks back at me. "Challenge?" he asks me. "Did you say challenge?"

I laugh. "Yes, I did. Why, what have you got into your head now, Anakin Skywalker?"

He grins at me.. "Just watch me," he tells me. He approaches the herd of beasts, walking slowly and carefully so as not to startle them. One looks up at him, and he focuses on it. And then, quite to my utter surprise, he leaps onto its back!

"Ani, are you crazy!!?" I shout in alarm.

"I never back down from a challenge," he replies with a wink as he struggles to keep his balance. The beast obviously doesn't like having a passenger and starts to run, doing its best to dislodge him. Anakin laughs as it runs erratically up over the ridge, I run along behind to keep up, laughing along with him.

"Whoa... whoa!!" he yells as he begins to lose his balance. . It kicks out its back legs and sends him flying onto the ground, and then gives him an extra kick with its hooves for good measure. He's hurt, I know it! Why did I let him do something so fool hardy?? I run to him, seeing him struggling to stand, but unable to because of the pain.

"Ani!" I cry. 'Ani are you alright??' I run up to him and turn him over. "Ani!!"

He is laughing!! He is actually laughing! Relieved and annoyed that he finds my distress so hilarious I smack him as hard as I can against the leather tabard. This only makes him laugh more and he grabs my wrists to prevent me from hitting him again. "You are incorrigible," I tell him, trying not to smile at him.

"Yes I know," he says. He roll me over onto my back, but I'm not about to give up so easily and we struggle for supremacy, both of us laughing. Finally he gives up the fight, and simply lies on the grass, with me on top of him.

"Do you give up?" I ask triumphantly.

"Yes," he tells me. "You win."

I smile. "Just remember that, Jedi, the next time you try to pull a stunt like that again."

He gives me his best innocent face. "What stunt would that be, my lady?"

"Trying to scare the heart out of me," I reply. "I really thought you were hurt," I add. His expression grows more serious as he realizes that I am being completely honest.

"I'm sorry," he tells me. "I didn't mean to frighten you, Padmé."

I look down at him and for a moment we simply look into one another's eyes. I am suddenly acutely aware of our bodies' closeness, for what had started out as a playful tumble in the grass has suddenly increased a notch in intensity.

"I would never do anything to hurt you or frighten you," he tells me softly, releasing one of his hands and bringing it up to my face. He pushes a tendril of hair away and gently caresses my cheek. How much longer am I going to be able to hide what I feel for him? How much longer will I be able to deny the way he makes me feel? Anakin looks into my eyes and I know that he can see what I am feeling. He is a Jedi, after all; he knows what I am feeling sometimes before I do myself. He releases his other hand and places it on my shoulder, trying to coax me down. His eyes are fixed upon my mouth, and I know what he wants. I want it too, and begin to move towards him. But then I stop; I can't do this, I can't give in to this, no matter how much I want to, no matter how much I want him.

"No, Anakin," I say sitting up. "We can't do this." I get off of him and stand up, turning away from him. He gets to his feet and move over to me.

"Why not?" he asks, moving closer to me. I look up at him, and for an instant I almost give in. He moves even closer, bending down to me. I reach out and put my hand on his arm, meaning to push him away, but not quite managing it.

"You are so beautiful," he tells me softly. "So...beautiful..." and then he kisses me. He holds my body against his as our mouths meet, the intensity of our kiss doubled since the previous day. It is as though there are no barriers to being together, I am not a senator, he is not a Jedi, and we are merely a man and a woman, driven by our need for one another.

It would be so easy to give in to the way he makes me feel, but I know that I mustn't, and I know that it must be me who remains the voice of reason. I pull away from him, breaking our kiss.

"We can't, Ani," I say softly. "We just can't. I'm sorry..."

He nods at me, the disappointment clear in his beautiful eyes. "I'm sorry, Padmé," he tells me as he releases me. "This time it was my doing, not yours."

I smile at him. "Well then we're even I guess, aren't we?" I say.

He smiles back at me. "Yeah, I guess so." For a moment we simply stand, not touching, but looking deeply into one another's eyes, communicating silently the longing we dare not put into words.

Padmé woke up, startled by the powerful emotions her dream had evoked. This was a memory, I know it, she thought to herself. Anakin...

Chapter 37

Chapter 37

Anakin was up early the next morning. He made his way out onto the terrace and stood in meditation, his hands behind his back. Being around Padmé had always been so soothing to him; being with her in this beautiful place that held so much significance for him was like a balm to his soul. He savored the feeling of the gentle morning breeze upon his face. The most commonplace things, like feeling the wind in his hair, like *having* hair, were still so incredible to him. He knew that after twenty years of living in that hellish nightmare, he would never take any of those simple things for granted again.

Padmé found Anakin standing on the terrace, facing the lake, his hands clasped behind his back. Looking at him, she suddenly had a flash of him standing there years earlier; his hair was about the same length, though he was broader now. She remembered that he had been very worried about something... what was it?

"Good morning," he said, turning to her as he sensed her presence. "Did you sleep well?"

Padmé nodded, still trying to grab a hold of the memory that was dancing around within her mind.

"What is it?" he asked, seeing the pensive look on her face.

"I'm just remembering something," she told him. "When I saw you standing there just now, it brought to mind an image of you standing in that same place years ago....you were upset, worried about someone..."

"My mother," he told her. "I remember what you are describing. I'd had a nightmare about my mother the previous night. We left for Tatooine later on that day, but I was too late to save her."

Padmé nodded. "I know," she said softly. She walked over to him. "I'm sorry," she said, putting her hand on his arm.

"Your memories are coming back more frequently," he observed, pushing the thought of his mother's death from his mind, forcing himself to smile. "That's great."

"I had a dream last night that I am quite certain is a memory of being here with you," she told him.

"Did you?" he replied. "Tell me about it."

Padmé walked over to the railing and looked out at the lake as she gathered her thoughts. "You were riding on the back of some sort of woolly beast," she said. "I don't remember its name."

"A shaak," he told her as he joined her. "You remembered that?" he asked with a smile.

"You mean that really happened?" she asked.

He nodded.

Padmé smiled. “You fell, and I thought you were hurt, and when I reached you, you were laughing. I started hitting you,” she said with a laugh.

Anakin laughed too. “I remember that day very well. Did you remember what happened after that?”

“Yes,” she told him. ‘I remember how we kissed,’ she said. “I remember trying not to give in to the way I was feeling about you, but being unable to resist you. That feeling was very apparent in this dream, very real. I think I must have been in love with you as long as you were with me, only I didn’t want to admit it. How foolish of me.”

Anakin smiled. “No, not foolish; just sensible. You knew how hard it would be for us to be together and you thought you were doing the right thing.”

“Perhaps,” she said. “But obviously in the end my efforts were in vain. You managed to sweep me off my feet.”

“It wasn’t easy, believe me,” he told her with a smile. “You can be very single minded, Padmé.”

“I get the impression that you are very much the same way,” she countered.

Anakin laughed. “You *are* starting to remember, aren’t you?”

She smiled. “So it seems. Are you hungry? I think breakfast is ready.”

“I am,” he said. “Perhaps we could go out to that meadow after breakfast. It might trigger more memories.”

“I’d like that,” she said. “Good idea.”

A gentle breeze greeted Anakin and Padmé as they reached the meadow later on that morning. The tall grass brushed against their legs as they walked, the vista before them as spectacular as Anakin had remembered.

Anakin turned to look at his wife as she stopped to survey their surroundings. Something was coming back to her, he could tell by the expression on her face. “You remember this place, don’t you?” he asked.

Padmé nodded. “Yes,” she said, a smile forming on her face. “I do. This is exactly how it looked in my dream last night,” she told him. And then it struck her; it looked exactly like the place in her nightmare as well. Now that she realized that this place was indeed real, it made her wonder how much of the rest of the dream was real. *No, it can’t be real*, she reasoned. *Anakin is here, he’s alive... he’s safe.*

She walked over to look at the water fall, her back to him. “It’s so beautiful,” she said.

Anakin walked over to her and stood behind her. “We used to have picnics here,” he told her. “Remember?”

“I think so,” she replied, her mind trying to work through the details of the recurring dream despite her efforts to dismiss it. “Tell me, is there a marsh nearby?”

Anakin shook his head. "No, the land is too high. Why do you ask?"

"I've had a dream about this meadow, but there is always a marsh nearby," she explained. "It is the nightmare that I've had so many times. It's a relief to know that it was not an actual memory too."

Anakin nodded. "Was the marsh significant?" he asked.

"Yes," she said, frowning as she remembered. "Very much so."

"Do you want to tell me about it?" he asked, putting his hands on her shoulders.

Padmé frowned, trying to decide if she wanted to spoil the peaceful, happy moment she was having with him by discussing her disturbing dream.

"No," she decided at last. 'I don't,' she said. "Not because I don't want you to know, I just don't want to spoil the lovely time we're having."

Anakin smiled, and, tentatively, put his arms around her waist. "We've had many wonderful times here," he told her. "I don't think I've ever been as happy in my life as I was when I was with you, here. This was one of the only places where we didn't need to hide how we felt about one another, where we could simply be a married couple, and not have to worry about anyone discovering our secret."

Padmé nodded as she relaxed against him, her eyes on the rushing waters in the distance. "That was difficult, keeping that secret, wasn't it?" she asked.

"Yes, it was," he told her. "It was very frustrating sometimes, not being able to show you how I feel if we happened to be together in public, or not being able to live with you openly. But for the times we were together, it was all worth it."

"I'm sure it was," she replied with a smile. "I'm starting to see why you were able to break down my reticence, Anakin."

Anakin raised his eyebrows and looked down at her. "Oh really?" he asked.

She nodded, as she turned to face him. "Yes," she said, reaching up and stroking his face. "I'm falling in love with you all over again," she told him.

Her words were so unexpected, and quite beyond his wildest hopes. *Will she still feel this way when she remembers everything?* He thought, *will she still love me when she learns about the monster that I've been for the past twenty years?*

Pushing those thoughts far from his mind, Anakin pulled his wife closer to him, bending to kiss her. Padmé wrapped her arms around his neck, welcoming his kiss and returning it equally. There was no hesitation this time, no awkwardness as there had been mere days earlier. This time, their kiss was one of lovers, one of passion and longing.

Flashes of memory bombarded Padmé as she felt Anakin's strong hands run through her hair as he kissed her, filling her with a familiar and undeniable feeling of longing.

Anakin knew that if he did not put an end to their embrace, he would not be able to prevent it from spiraling out of control. And as much as he wanted it to continue, he knew that until she knew the entire truth of what had happened, it would be wrong for him to do so.

His seeming reticence confused Padmé, and she looked up at him as he pulled back. “Ani?” she said. “Is something wrong?”

Anakin looked at his wife, the regrets and guilt filling him. “I’m sorry,” he said softly. “So sorry for everything.”

Padmé frowned. “What are you talking about?” she asked. “What are you sorry for?”

Anakin sighed. “There’s so much that you don’t know, Padmé,” he said. “So much about the past that...”

Padmé put a finger over his lips. “Stop,” she said. “We’re not going to dwell on the past, remember?” she reminded him. “We’re going to rebuild our lives, together.”

He nodded, feeling utterly torn. She wanted him as much as he wanted her, she wanted their life together again; but how could their lives be simply resumed after all that had happened? Surely the memories of Mustafar would return, it was only a matter of time. How would she be able to dismiss the past once they did?

“I want that more than anything,” Anakin told her, holding her face in his hands. “I want you more than anything. I...I just don’t want...”

“Anakin, listen to me,” she said. “Whatever has happened in the past, the fact that you searched for me, and are willing to face that past with me is tremendously significant; it shows me the depth of your love and commitment to me, it shows me how right I am to trust you and believe in you and what we had together. I want that again, Anakin; more than anything.”

Her words were too much for him, and he could not prevent the tears from filling his eyes. He pulled her to him again, holding her tightly as the tears ran down his face. “How did I live without you?” he asked her, as the twenty years of agonizing loneliness and pain pouring forth. *And how will I live if you push me away now?*

Star Destroyer Executor

Darth Ferreus had spent the month since his promotion living life to the fullest, and taking complete advantage of his position as commander of the Imperial fleet. He had delegated the job of finding the Rebel base to his first officer, a somewhat pompous man by the name of Kendal Ozzel. Ozzel hated Ferreus; the dark lord would have to be a fool not to know it. But it didn’t bother him; he was used to others hating and envying him. Ferreus relished the fact that he was Ozzel’s superior officer, a man nearly twice his age with at least ten times his military experience. *But he isn’t a Sith*, Ferreus realized, though he himself was still trying to come to grips with the mysterious aspects of his new apprenticeship. He was adept at using the Force, but he was a lazy man, who would rather have others do his work for him.

Were it not for his unusual skills, Palpatine would have killed him long ago. As it was though, he had no choice but to stomach the young man’s insufferable arrogance. But that did not preclude the possibility of striking fear into the black heart of his new apprentice.

Having been informed, rather smugly, he couldn’t help but notice, that the emperor demanded he make contact, Ferreus made his way to the audience chamber that had been created just for the express purpose of communicating with his dark master. He could feel the fear slowly spreading within him, cold and sickening. The *Executor* was no closer to finding

the Rebel base now then they had been a month earlier, and Ferreus was certain that he was about to be blamed for that.

Bracing himself for his master's ire, Ferreus knelt before the giant holographic image of the emperor as it came into focus before him.

"You wanted to speak to me, Master?" Ferreus asked.

"Why yes, I did," Palpatine replied, his voice laced with sarcasm. 'I understand you have been enjoying yourself lately, Lord Ferreus,' he continued, his yellow eyes narrowing with anger. "And that you have used the *Executor* as your own personal brothel."

"That isn't true," Ferreus tried to protest, but was interrupted by the iron grip of his master's invisible fist around his throat.

"Do not lie to me," Palpatine hissed. 'I have heard all about your licentious behavior, all about your debauchery,' he continued. "I don't give a damn about your *personal needs*, Lord Ferreus. You are my servant, and I gave you an order. You have not found the rebels yet, and I demand to know why."

Ferreus fell forward onto his hands as Palpatine released him. He rubbed gingerly at his throat. "It... it's a very big galaxy, my master," he replied at last.

"Is that your excuse?" Palpatine barked. "That the galaxy is big??"

"Well, it is..."

"SILENCE!" Palpatine shrieked, blasting Ferreus with a bolt of energy. "You have unlimited resources at your disposal! Do not tell me that you cannot find the Rebels whose technology is a fraction of the Empire's!! Surely there are radio transmissions that are unaccounted for somewhere in the galaxy. Trace them!"

"My lord, there are literally millions, billions of transmissions sent each day," gasped Ferreus, beginning to think that his master was indeed quite mad. "How are we to know which ones are from or to the Rebel base?"

Palpatine stared at the pathetic excuse for an apprentice before him. If he did not need Ferreus so much he would take great pleasure in killing him right here, right now. *Vader would not dare question me this way*, he reflected. *He had honor, and he was intelligent... perhaps too intelligent* he decided, remembering Vader's treachery. "Find a way," he said at last. "I will not brook any more excuses, Lord Ferreus. Find a way to trace them, or I will find a new apprentice."

Ferreus did not reply, but merely bowed in response as the image of the emperor faded from view. He rose unsteadily to his feet. *Damn you, Palpatine*, he thought angrily, adjusting his sable cloak. *I will not let you treat me this way and get away with it. One day you'll pay for this humiliation.*

With that, Ferreus left the audience chamber, and made his way to the bridge, determined to make his officers pay for the foulness of his mood.

Chapter 38

Chapter 38

Sixth planet of the Hoth System

Luke Skywalker felt butterflies in his stomach as he packed his duffle bag with his few belongings. He would be leaving for Dagobah today, to meet his new Jedi Master, Yoda. While Luke welcomed the challenge he would no doubt face under the tutelage of the diminutive Jedi, the thought of leaving his friends, of leaving his sister, saddened him greatly. He and Leia had become very close in the past six weeks, and it hardly seemed possible to either of them that they had spent their first nineteen years apart, for the bond between them now was so strong.

Luke felt that it was for the good of both of them that he leave, for he could see that Obi-Wan was having difficulty keeping up with their training. He would never admit it of course; but Kenobi was not a young man anymore, and having two padawans would be demanding no matter how young a master may be.

Dagobah, from what Luke knew, was an isolated, primitive world, with little to offer in the way of technology or distraction. Yoda had lived there in self-exile since the end of the Republic, shielding himself from the emperor's discernment. It was the perfect place to concentrate on the training that would make Luke a Jedi; so why was he so reticent about leaving? Yes, he would miss Leia, Han, Obi-Wan, Wedge, and all the other friends he had made; but there was more to it than just that. He and Leia had been in steady contact with their father since they had parted ways. And now they had even spoken with their mother as well. It seemed to Luke that his family was just starting to bond, even if it were through long distance communication; on Dagobah, he would have no such communication. He knew that he would miss that, he knew that he would miss his father.

In the short time since discovering his father, Luke had come to greatly look forward to the times they spoke. He had begun to know the real Anakin Skywalker, and had started to discover what a truly remarkable man his father was. Now that he would be leaving for Dagobah, it would be months before he had the chance to see him again. *I finally meet my father, and now I'm going to be parted from him yet again. Not to mention my mother...* It had been almost surreal seeing her face on the comm. screen; she looked so much like Leia it was astounding. But there was more to it than that; Luke was certain that he had seen her face in his dreams. There was no way he could remember her consciously, for he had been mere minutes old when he had been taken from her. Yet, somehow, he knew her face; he had seen it many times over the years in his dreams. He did not know who she was at the time, though he felt a strong connection to her. And now he knew, and he wanted desperately to meet her in person. This too would be put off for months; another reason he was less than enthusiastic about leaving.

A knock at his cabin door interrupted Luke's reflections, and he knew who it was before he even answered it. His sister's aura was so brilliant and strong, there was no mistaking it. It reminded Luke of the presence he had experienced when he was in the trench over the Death

Star, his father's true essence as he guided his son through that perilous fight. Leia was very much like Anakin, despite her resemblance to their mother. *Perhaps that is why they were able to bond so quickly*, Luke reasoned as he went to answer the door.

"Hi," he said as he saw his sister on the other side. He could tell that she was as upset about his departure as he himself was. "Come on in."

Star Destroyer Executor

"I'm sorry, my lord, could you repeat that?"

Ferreus scowled at the young officer, growing impatient with his own inability to make himself clear. He would never admit that, however, and decided to take it out on the two officers who held the bridge at the moment.

"I want you to find a way to monitor any unusual communications," Ferreus said. "Anything that can't be accounted for, anything that is from an unusual or unknown source."

Piett glanced quickly at his associate, and then looked back at Ferreus. "You mean you want me to monitor broadcast channels?" he asked.

"Yes, yes," Ferreus said impatiently. "Anything that may seem...suspicious."

Piett raised his eyebrows, but did not comment. *Suspicious? Does Ferreus have any idea what he's talking about? What exactly does he mean by 'suspicious'?*

"Suspicious in nature my lord, or by virtue of the source of the broadcast?" Piett asked at last.

"Both," Ferreus replied, not entirely sure himself. "I guess... yes, both."

"Perhaps we ought to use the Zarlenga decoder," Captain Magus Reyal, suggested, looking at Piett with an utterly straight face.

"Yes, by all means," Ferreus replied eagerly, pleased that his officers were so knowledgeable. "Do so at once... and, uh... keep me posted at regular intervals of your progress. That will be all."

With that, the thoroughly confused Ferreus left the bridge to return to the comfort of his quarters.

"Zarlenga decoder?" Piett asked with a laugh as he turned to Reyal. "You really are audacious aren't you?"

Reyal grinned. "So you do remember the name from the academy then?"

"Yes of course," Piett replied. "Who could forget that character? He was the most insufferable hypocrite at the academy. I can't believe you said that to Ferreus."

"I can't believe he actually thinks there is such a thing," Reyal countered. "What an idiot."

Piett nodded. "Yes, I couldn't agree more. But he's an idiot in command, and so we must do what he says, no matter how inane it may seem."

Reyal shook his head in disgust. "Vader may have been ruthless, but at least he was intelligent. Brilliant even."

"I never served with him," Piett replied. "Though I would have enjoyed the experience."

"Not an easy man to get along with," Reyal told him. "But he was an excellent leader, the best I've ever served."

"And Ferreus is his successor," Piett reminded him. "Hard to believe, isn't it?"

"Yeah, sure is," Reyal sighed. "So I guess we have our work cut out for us, what Firmus?"

"Yes, it certainly seems that way," Piett replied. "Let's get to it. This isn't going to be easy."

"Especially without the Zarlenga decoder," Reyal quipped.

Piett merely laughed as the two men made their way to the communication station to begin the arduous task set before them.

Naboo-Lake Retreat

Anakin was awoken the next morning by his wife's kiss. He opened his eyes to see her sitting on the edge of his bed, watching him with a smile.

"Good morning," she said. "I hope you don't mind me waking you up."

Anakin smiled. "If you wake me up like that, no, not at all," he told her.

"Good," she replied. "I have an idea," she told him, a twinkle in her eyes.

Anakin looked up at his wife. The sparkle had returned to her eyes, and, little by little, she was becoming the Padmé he had known. "What is your idea?" he asked, amused by her enthusiasm.

"Let's go swimming," she told him with a smile.

Not exactly what I was hoping she'd suggest, Anakin mused. "Swimming?" he asked. "Right now?"

"Yes, why not?" she said. "It's a wonderful way to start the day."

Anakin nodded. "You remember that do you?" he asked.

"Yes I do," she replied. "I also remember how you and I used to swim over to that island," she continued with a smile.

"Do you also remember how cold that lake is in the morning?" Anakin asked with a smile.

Padmé laughed. "Cold? Oh come now," she teased. "Surely a Jedi Knight like you isn't intimidated by the cold."

"Intimidated? No, not at all," he replied. "But given the choice between an icy cold lake and a nice warm bed, I think the choice is quite obvious."

Padmé stared at him, not quite sure if he was being serious. When she saw the playful gleam in his eyes, she laughed, realizing that he was teasing her.

"You love teasing me, don't you?" she asked, arms crossed over her chest.

Anakin nodded, folding his arms behind his head. "I always have," he said with a smile.

Padmé shook her head. “So bad,” she said, “so naughty.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing,” Anakin commented.

Padmé did not reply, but attacked him with a flurry of tickles directed at his bare ribcage.

Anakin was totally unprepared for her attack, which rather surprised him, and could only do his best to grab her tiny wrists as he writhed with laughter under her assault. Finally he grabbed her and pulled her into the bed beside him, holding her arms immobile.

“Do you give up?” he asked.

Padmé shook her head, a hint of a smile on her face. “Never,” she told him.

Anakin laughed, so happy to see the woman he loved returning to him. “You’re pretty brave,” he told her. “Attacking a Jedi in his own bed that way.”

Padmé lifted an eyebrow. “Jedi don’t intimidate me,” she told him.

“No?” he asked.

She shook her head again, as the playfulness between them morphed into something more serious. Anakin released his hold on her arms, and ran his hands up the length of them. Padmé ran her hands over the tautness of his bare chest, memories of moments such as this flashing through her mind, moments of a passion that she was beginning to feel again.

“Perhaps there is something to be said for staying in bed,” she said with a smile.

Anakin smiled, taking her face in his hands. Force, how easy it would be to give in to the feelings she was evoking. He could see in her eyes that she wanted him as much as he wanted her, that the feelings and passions that had been irrepressible years ago had somehow transcended all that had befallen them in the ensuing years. *I can’t...I mustn’t*, he told himself. *As much as I want to...*

“So a swim you say,” he said at last, stroking her face gently. “Perhaps it would be good to get some exercise.”

Padmé nodded; somewhat confused by the mixed signals she was getting from him.

“Okay,” she said. “If you’re sure that’s what you want.”

“Well, it isn’t exactly what I want,” he told her, “but I suppose it will have to suffice, at least for now.”

“And what is it that you want?” she asked.

Don’t do this, Padmé, he thought as he fought to keep a rein on his feelings. “I want you to be happy,” he told her at last. “And if swimming is what it will take to do that, then I will brave the cold.”

Padmé smiled. “You’re very brave,” she teased as she moved away and got out of the bed. “I’ll meet you on the beach.”

Anakin nodded, watching her leave the room. He moved to the edge of the bed and sat for a moment, running his hands through his tousled hair. *How much longer can I go on this way?* he wondered. *How much longer will I be able to keep control of my feelings?* He

realized that he was in a no win situation; for as long as Padmé knew nothing of Mustafar, he must not allow his feelings for her to control him. But when she learned of it, or perhaps remembered it on her own, would she want him like she did now? Would she want anything to do with him at all once she knew the entire, ugly truth of who he had been the past twenty years?

Perhaps a cold dip in the lake is just what I need right now, he mused as he stood up and went to get dressed.

Chapter 39

Chapter 39

Cold was an understatement, Anakin thought as he made his way across the lake, doing his best to keep up with his wife. She may have suffered memory loss, but she certainly had not forgotten how to swim.

Cutting through the water with easy strokes, Padmé was enjoying herself thoroughly. While Anakin found the cold water to be just short of torture, she found it invigorating. She felt so alive, so free — it had been so long since she had felt this way.

Glancing over her shoulder quickly, Padmé smiled to herself as she saw Anakin plowing through the water with powerful strokes. She was so grateful to him for bringing her here; it was just the trigger she needed to release the memories that had been locked up in her mind for so long. Yet, she knew that there was still much she did not know, something significant, and that bothered her. Whatever it was, she sensed that it was what was holding Anakin back from initiating a more physical nature to their relationship. She recognized the look in his eyes when he looked at her, and knew that he was not a man that held back when it came to how he felt. So why was he holding back now? What was it that had happened that would make him feel the need to do so? *I will remember in time*, she told herself. *Everything else is coming back to me, whatever this is, it will as well*, she reasoned, deciding not to dwell on it any further.

“Now, was that so bad?” Padmé asked as they walked onto the shore of the island.

Anakin smiled. “Do you really want to know?” he asked.

Padmé laughed. “I’ll take that as a yes,” she said as she sat down on the sandy beach. “It’s so peaceful here,” she said, closing her eyes and drinking in the warm sunshine.

Anakin sat down beside her, stretching out his long legs in front of him and leaning back on one arm. He was reminded of many other moments spent like this, moments spent without a care in the world, when it seemed that all that mattered, all that existed was the woman at his side, and the love they shared. *How did I let that slip away? How did it all go so wrong?*

“Something bothering you?”

Anakin looked up at his wife, who was studying his face intently. “You seem a thousand light years away,” she told him.

“No, I’m right here,” he told her with a smile. “Right where I belong.”

Padmé smiled. “You know, I remember being here with my sister,” she said. “We’d always race to see who could make it out here first. If I won, Sola would always fake a cramp or have some excuse why she hadn’t won,” she laughed.

Anakin smiled. “You two were very close,” he commented.

Padmé nodded. “Yes we were,” she replied. “I don’t remember if you had siblings... do you?”

Anakin shook his head. “Nope,” he said, digging in the sand with one finger. “Just me.”

“They broke the mold when they made you, did they?” she teased.

Anakin laughed. “Well, you might say that,” he replied. “I always wished I’d had a brother, though. Or even a sister. It was kind of lonely growing up without someone my own age.”

“I’m sure it must have been,” she said. “You began your training to become a Jedi when you were a child, didn’t you?”

Anakin nodded. “Yes, shortly after you and I met. Qui-Gon took me as his padawan and secured my freedom. That’s how I was able to leave Tatooine.”

“Your freedom?” she asked. And then she remembered. ‘You were a slave,’ she recalled. “I remember now — I remember being so shocked when I learned that.”

“You were,” he agreed. “Hard to believe such a thing still exists,” he commented with a frown, remembering the cruelty of his various masters, remembering his mother being unable to sleep at night sometimes because she’d been beaten...

“You know what the trouble with swimming out here is?” he said, changing the subject abruptly.

“What is that?” Padmé asked.

“We have to swim all the way back to eat breakfast,” he told her with a grin.

Padmé laughed. “Is there ever a time when you’re *not* hungry, Anakin Skywalker?”

Now there’s a loaded question... “Well, occasionally, maybe,” he replied. “I’ve just got warmed up though; I really hate the thought of jumping back in that deep freeze.”

“Deep freeze,” she said shaking her head. “You’re such an exaggerator,” she said with a laugh.

Anakin merely smiled in response as he lay back against the warm sand. “And if I told you that you are the most beautiful woman in the universe, would you still think me an exaggerator?” he asked.

Padmé was rather taken aback by his question, and did not respond at once. “Well,” she said, finger on her chin. “I’m not so sure now,” she replied.

Anakin laughed in response. “Typical woman,” he said as he closed his eyes. “So fickle.”

Padmé was silent, and Anakin smiled to himself, knowing that she was trying to think of an appropriate response. He was not prepared for what that response would be however and nearly jumped out of his skin when he felt a gush of cold water on his now warm skin. Opening his eyes, he looked up to see his wife standing above him triumphantly, a huge grin on her face.

“You’re going to pay for that,” he said, scrambling to his feet and taking off after her.

Padmé screamed and ran for the water, doing her best to stay ahead of her husband. But he was much faster than she was, and it wasn't long before he caught up to her. Scooping her up into his arms, he walked out into the water, ignoring her protests to be released.

"I don't think so," he said with a smile. "You don't really think I'm going to let you get away with *that* now, do you?"

"Yes," she replied, trying not to laugh.

Anakin just shook his head. "You are too much, you know that?" he said as he prepared to toss her into the water.

"No don't!" she cried, holding onto him tightly.

"But you like the cold," he told her with a smile. "Don't you?"

"I do, but not all at once," she explained desperately.

"Ah ha," he said. "But you don't mind giving it to me all at once," he said.

"Oh come on," she said, "That's hardly the same thing!"

"Maybe not," he said, getting ready to toss her again, only to have her tighten her grip on his neck.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" she cried, capitulating finally. "Are you happy?"

Anakin looked down at her triumphantly. "Now, was that so difficult?" he asked with a grin.

She shook her head. "You are terrible," she said. "What am I going to do with you?"

What am I going to do with you? How many times had Padmé asked Anakin that question over the years, how many playful moments they shared were summed up succinctly by those simple words?

The seeming innocuous, simple rhetorical question triggered a wave of memories in both of them, and for a moment they simply stared at one another. Padmé took one of her hands and brought it to his face, stroking it gently. "Ani," she said simply, the memories too powerful to allow her to say any more.

"My angel," he replied, seeing in her eyes that she remembered just as he did. Unable to resist, he kissed her, as she wrapped her arms around his neck once again. Nothing else in the universe mattered at that moment, nothing else in the universe existed at that moment, save the power of their love. Anakin felt as though he had been transported back twenty years, to a time when nothing else *had* mattered. Nothing would be easier than to pretend it was so, to let go of all the inhibitions and problems that plagued him. His angel was in his arms, and she loved him. Wasn't that all that *should* matter? But it wasn't — and Anakin knew this. He also knew that if he did not put a stop to what was happening, his ability to reason would be utterly lost. And so he did put a stop to it, as much as it killed him to do so, he broke their kiss, again.

"I think we should get back to the house," he said as he set Padmé down, hating the look of disappointment in her eyes.

Padmé looked up at him, confused again, but more than that: frustrated. “Okay,” she said. “I guess you’re right.”

“You know I can’t survive long without food,” he said with a smile, trying to break the tremendous tension that had sprung up between them.

Padmé smiled perfunctorily. “Yes, this is true,” she replied. “Well then, let’s be off,” she said, walking into the water ahead of him so he would not see the tears forming in her eyes.

Sixth Planet of the Hoth System

“No Leia, that’s not it. Try it again.”

“But I’m doing it exactly as you instructed,” Leia protested in exasperation.

Obi-Wan could sense that the young woman was getting frustrated; it had been a long afternoon of training, and she was clearly exhausted. But it was more than that, and Obi-Wan knew what it was: Luke had left that morning, and Leia was lost without her twin.

Seeing the two of them growing closer over the past weeks had made Obi-Wan wonder if separating them years ago had been the right thing to do. Yet, the decision to do so had been made under exceedingly difficult conditions: Padmé had been near death; *and then there was what happened to Anakin...*

“Let’s call it a day, shall we?” Obi-Wan suggested gently. “You’ve worked very hard today.”

Leia frowned, not wishing to quit simply because she was having difficulty getting a maneuver down. But she was exhausted, there was no point trying to deny it. *I miss Luke*, she thought morosely as she turned off her light saber. *I miss my father.*

“You’re doing very well, Leia,” Obi-Wan assured her, mindful of her sensitive nature. “This is a particularly difficult stance, and yet you’re doing very well with it.”

“Then why don’t I have it yet?” she asked, pushing loose hairs from her face.

“Patience,” Obi-Wan cautioned her. ‘You must remember to be patient, Leia.’ He stopped as he recalled how many times he’d had similar discussions with Anakin. “You are so very much like your father,” he told her with a smile. “He always wanted to learn everything at once, and get it right immediately.”

“He probably did,” Leia remarked. “Being the Chosen One and all.”

“Well even the Chosen One had his set backs,” Obi-Wan told her. “But being incredibly stubborn, he never let them get to him. He would always find a way, no matter how long it took. I had to drag him from the temple gymnasium many a night when he was a boy just to get him to go to bed.”

Leia couldn’t help but smile. “He was a stubborn child?”

“Yes and no,” Obi-Wan replied. “He was so eager to please, that sometimes it made him push himself too far. Plus the fact that the Jedi Council had rejected him made his determination to succeed that much greater.”

“They rejected him because he was too old?” Leia asked.

Obi-Wan nodded. "Yes they did, and I don't think Anakin ever forgot that, or forgave them. Qui-Gon took him as his padawan without the blessings of the Council."

"So how did you end up as his master?"

A fleeting hint of sadness passed through Obi-Wan's eyes as he remembered the day his master had perished at the hands of the Sith Lord, Darth Maul. "I promised Qui-Gon as he lay dying that I would train Anakin," he told Leia. "Qui-Gon had complete faith that your father was the Chosen One of Jedi legend, and must be trained at any cost. It seems he was right."

Leia nodded. "I miss him," she said quietly.

"I know you do," Obi-Wan said, putting a hand on her shoulder. "You and your father are very close."

"We are," Leia said, feeling more miserable by the minute at the thought of him. 'I think I will go and contact him,' she said. "I need to see his face."

"Good idea," Obi-Wan said as they left the make-shift gymnasium together. "Give him my best, will you?"

"I will," she said as she ran off. Obi-Wan watched her go, thanking the Force that Leia Skywalker had been able to reach her father and bring him back from the Darkness. *The future of the galaxy is in your hands now, Leia*, he thought, wondering if the young woman realized just how significant she and her brother were. *You and your brother will shape the destiny of a generation.*

Naboo-Lake Retreat

Breakfast was tension filled as both Anakin and Padmé were lost in their own thoughts. Anakin hated the way he had pushed his wife away earlier; he knew that she was hurting and confused. *Better that than the alternative*, he reasoned. It was his hope that once she did learn the truth, she would be able to forgive him. But he could not presume such a thing; the atrocities he had committed both against her and the galaxy were staggering. It would take a great deal of love and forgiveness on her part to get past them, if indeed she was capable of doing so.

"Excuse me, but there is a communication coming through from the Hoth System," a maid servant announced as Anakin and Padmé finished their meal. They looked at one another, both excited to hear that their children were contacting them. Leaving their meal unfinished, they stood up and left the room at once, anxious to see the faces of their twins.

"Leia!" Anakin said as he and Padmé sat down in front of the screen. "It's wonderful to see you, sweetheart. How are you?"

"I'm okay," Leia replied. "It's good to see both of you— I've missed you."

Anakin frowned, knowing his daughter well enough to know that she was far from okay. "What's wrong?" he asked simply and without preamble.

Leia looked surprised, but only for a moment. She knew her father well enough by now to know that he could read her like an open book.

"Luke left for Dagobah today," she told him. "I guess I just miss him."

"I'm sure you do," Anakin replied. "As he misses you, no doubt."

"He didn't even want to go, not really," Leia told her parents. "But he knew how important it was for his training, for our training actually. Obi-Wan was having trouble keeping up with the two of us," she said with a hint of a smile.

Anakin laughed. "Now why doesn't that surprise me?" he said, looking at his wife.

"So why did Luke go to Dagobah?" Padmé asked. "I don't understand."

"He went there to be trained by Master Yoda," Leia told her mother. "One of the great Jedi Masters."

Padmé nodded. "I see," she said, wondering when she would ever get to meet her children. "And how long will he be there?"

"It's hard to say," Anakin said, knowing what was bothering her. 'But we'll be together soon, Padmé,' he told her. "Don't worry."

"I wish that were true," Leia said with a sigh. 'But with the Empire no doubt scouring the galaxy trying to find us, we don't dare travel such a great distance. But enough about me,' she said. "How are you two? You look great, both of you."

"We're very well, both of us," Anakin said. He looked at Padmé. "And your mother's memory is returning steadily."

"Is that right, Mother?" Leia asked with a smile.

Padmé nodded. "Yes, it is," she replied. "Being here has done so much to trigger my memory, I'm so grateful your father thought to take me here."

Leia looked back at her father, asking him the unspoken questions — *does she know about Mustafar? Does she know about Vader?*

Anakin knew what his daughter was wondering, hearing her silent questions. "She has a ways to go yet," he said. "But in time she will remember everything, won't you Angel?"

Padmé nodded, getting the feeling that something had just transpired between father and daughter that she was not privy to, and it only made her more determined to learn all that she could about her past. "Yes, I will," she said. "I'm remembering more every day."

"That's wonderful," Leia replied with a smile. "Oh, before I forget, Obi-Wan said to send his best to you both."

"How is the old man?" Anakin asked with a smile.

"He's fine," Leia replied. "He complains about the cold a lot," she added with a smile.

Anakin laughed. "Yes, I'm sure," he said. "He never did like the cold."

"Reminds me of someone else," Padmé said pointedly, looking at her husband.

Anakin looked at her with a smile. "Well, I was born on a desert planet, remember? I have no tolerance for cold."

"Ah, so that's it," Padmé replied, smiling back at him. "How silly of me."

Leia looked at her parents, feeling decidedly left out. She could not help but notice how much more at ease her mother was with her father now, the way she looked at him now; no doubt her feelings for her father were returning as her memory did. Leia only hoped that those feelings would be enough to get past the crimes of his past. *If I can love him enough to forgive him, then surely she can too... I hate to think of what it will do to him if she cannot.*

"Well the power restrictions are still on," Leia told her parents. "So I'd better go."

"Very well," Anakin said. "It was good to see you, Leia. I miss you very much. We both do."

Leia smiled, wishing fervently that she could be there to feel her father's strong, reassuring embrace. "I miss you too," she said softly, willing herself not to cry. "I love you both, very much."

"We love you too, Leia," Padmé replied with a smile. "And we'll see you soon."

Leia nodded. "I hope so," she replied. "Goodbye for now."

Sitting back in the chair, Leia watched as the image of her parents faded out of view. It was then that the tears that she had managed to hold at bay finally came.

Chapter 40

Chapter 40

Star Destroyer Executor

Darth Ferreus was in a foul mood. It seemed as though someone had been spying on him; not only that, they had been reporting his actions to the emperor. Ferreus felt humiliated that his sexual escapades had been the source of discussion between some of his men, one in particular. *Which one*, he wondered as he stormed through the corridors of the *Executor*. *Which one hates me the most? Which one is foolish enough to mess with me?* Ferreus felt certain that he knew who it was, and was determined to make an example of him.

“Admiral Ozzy!” Ferreus barked as he reached the bridge. “Get your sorry ass over here, now!”

Ferreus pretended not to notice the looks that the men exchanged.

“My name is Ozzel, my lord,” Admiral Ozzel said as he walked over to his commander, and undisguised look of hatred in his eyes. “*Ozzel*, not *Ozzy*.”

“Do I look like I care?” Ferreus replied curtly. “I am far more interested in the conversation you had with the emperor recently.”

From the other side of the bridge, Captain Piett watched the confrontation as it unfolded, an uneasy feeling growing within him.

“I communicate with His Majesty regularly, Lord Ferreus,” Ozzel replied evenly, doing his best to maintain his composure. “You will have to be more specific.”

“Don’t toy with me, Admiral,” Ferreus threatened. “You know damn well what I’m talking about! Since when are my personal affairs your concerns?”

“When they interfere with the running of this ship, *my lord*,” Ozzel returned. “When your sexual gratification is more important to you than your obligation to the crew of this vessel. When...” Ozzel stopped as he felt a tightening form around his windpipe. His hands flew to his throat as Ferreus smiled, his outstretched hand clenching into a fist. Within moments, Ozzel fell down dead, his face blue and distorted.

“I’ve always wanted to try that,” Ferreus remarked, looking at the dead body at his feet. He looked up to see that every officer on the bridge was looking at him, their faces registering their utter shock.

“What are you all staring at?” he screamed. “Get back to your stations!” With that, he left the bridge.

Piett walked over to his fallen commanding officer. He knelt down beside him and closed the dead admiral’s eyes, shaken and horrified by the wanton, cold blooded act of violence he had just witnessed. He motioned over to a pair of crewmen. “Remove the admiral’s body,” he commanded quietly.

The blatant disregard for life and abuse of power sickened Pielt. Kendal Ozzel had been a proud, pompous man, but had he deserved such an ignominious fate? Pielt watched solemnly as the body of the hapless admiral was carried away. With a sinking feeling, he realized that he was now in command of the *Executor*. He only hoped that as such he would not be the madman's next victim.

Naboo-Lake Retreat

Padmé stood on the terrace, enjoying the cool evening breeze. She had spent much of the day trying to work through her confusion. *Why was Anakin's behavior so inconsistent? Why was he sending such mixed messages?* She felt certain that she remembered her husband well enough to know that he had never been able to get enough of her. His desire for her had always been insatiable, unquenchable; so why now was he pushing her away just when things started heating up between them? *Has he lost interest in me?* That made no sense, not given the lengths Anakin had gone to to see to it that she remembered him and their life together. *Was he not physically attracted to me anymore?* Again, this made no sense; she recognized the look in his eyes when he looked at her, she could feel the depth of his desire for her when he kissed her. *So what was holding him back?*

Padmé's ruminations were interrupted by Anakin's arrival. He stole up behind her and wrapped his arms around her, enfolding her in his cloak.

"It's chilly out here," she heard him say, his body pressed up against hers.

"Yes it is," she replied. "It's nice."

"If you like the cold," he replied, kissing the top of her head. "Something on your mind?" he asked.

"Why do you ask?" she replied, not looking at him.

Anakin was silent for a moment. He knew exactly what was bothering her, but did not know what to say to make it better. Perhaps it was time to put everything on the table; perhaps it was time for total truth.

"You just seem rather pensive, that's all," he said at last.

"I suppose I am rather pensive," she replied. "I'm just trying to sort through everything that's going through my mind, everything I've learned in the past few days."

"I'm sure it's been a little overwhelming," Anakin remarked. "But you're doing so well, Padmé. You're like the Padmé I knew all those years ago."

"Am I?" she asked.

"Yes," he replied, kissing her again. "Just as beautiful, just as brilliant, and just as sexy."

Padmé became uncomfortable hearing him talk this way, and she moved away from him. Anakin frowned as he sensed her discomfort.

"Angel?" he said. "Are you alright?"

Padmé remained silent, not even sure what to say to him in response. "I don't know," she said at last. "I'm very confused, Anakin."

"I know," he said, stepping back over to her. "And I'm sorry for making you feel that way."

She turned to face him. "Don't keep saying that," she said. "You keep saying you're sorry, and I have no idea what it is you're sorry for! Do you know how frustrating that is? Do you know how frustrating it is that you speak to me like you want me and then push me away like you don't?"

"There's a reason for that," he told her. "I promise you, it is not something I want to do..."

"What reason?" she cried. "What reason could there possibly for making me feel like you don't want me? Because that is exactly how I feel right now, Anakin. I feel as though you are holding me at arms' length, and I don't understand why."

"Angel, please," he began, reaching out to her.

"Don't," she said. "Don't begin something you're not willing to finish, Anakin. I can't take it anymore, I can't take the rejection. Either tell me what you so obviously feel needs telling, or don't touch me. I can't stand being teased this way."

Anakin did not respond at once. Her anger and her hurt were so real and so deep that he wasn't sure what to say. *Do I tell her now? In her current state? She's already angry with me; will telling her only make her push me away completely?*

"I'm sorry," he said again, at a loss to know what else to say at this point, his own frustrations reaching their zenith. "Do you think I want to push you away? Don't you think it's killing me that I have to hold myself back this way? Don't you know how much I want you, Padmé? How much I need you?"

"If you truly felt that way, nothing would hold you back," she retorted. "I remember how it was between us, Anakin; I remember how insatiable you were. Nothing could stand in your way if you wanted to be with me, not the Jedi Council, not Obi-Wan, not even the Clone Wars. And yet now you are telling me that there is something that is preventing you from being with me in the way you want? Is that what you expect me to believe?"

"I can't make you believe anything, Padmé," he replied tiredly. "Perhaps it is time for total truth between us. I didn't want to have to tell you like this, I was hoping you'd remember what happened on your own, but..."

"Tell me what?" she cried. "What is it that you feel is so horrible that it is preventing us from being together?"

Anakin looked at her, not even knowing where to start. *How do I tell you what I did to you?* He wondered.

"Angel, it's late," he began at last, taking her gently by the shoulders. "There is so much to tell you, so much that I don't even know where to start. I will tell you everything, I promise. In the morning, I will tell you the whole story, I swear it."

Padmé considered his words, seeing the sincerity in his eyes. She saw something else there too: fear, and it unnerved her. What was it he needed to tell her that was so horrific it struck fear into his heart?

"Very well," she said at last, calming down somewhat. "Just so long as you promise."

Anakin nodded. "You have my word," he said earnestly.

Padmé sighed. "Then I suppose it will have to wait until morning. I just hope that you know, Anakin, that no matter what you tell me, it won't change the way I feel about you. I hope you realize that, and know how much I love you. This wouldn't hurt so much if I didn't."

Anakin moved his hands up to her face. "I know," he told her softly. "I love you too, Angel. I just pray that you feel the same way about me after I tell you."

Padmé frowned. "You're scaring me," she told him.

Anakin looked down, unable to look into her eyes.

"Perhaps we ought to get to bed," she said at last, moving away from him, unnerved by his silence. "That big swim this morning wore me out."

"Very well," he said, watching her as she walked across the terrace, and perhaps out of his life for good. "Good night, angel."

"Goodnight Anakin."

Planet Dagobah

Luke made his way through the murky waters to the shore, already starting to regret coming to this bizarre planet.

"Artoo, be careful will you?" Luke chided as the astromech droid strolled along the ramp Luke had set up for it. "I don't want to have to fish you out of this mess."

Artoo simply whistled in response as if to tell his young master that he had everything under control. Luke knew better, however, and kept a close eye on the little droid.

Finally they both reached the shore, and Luke stood with his hands on his hips, looking around at the overgrown swamp around them. "*This* is where I'm supposed to find Yoda?" he asked Artoo. "This?"

"And found him you have."

Luke turned around quickly to see the diminutive Jedi Master standing before him. "Welcome to my home, young Skywalker."

"How did you know who I was?" Luke asked.

Yoda smiled enigmatically. "Come you have to be trained?" he asked.

Luke nodded. "Yes, that's the plan," he said, not sounding too enthusiastic.

"Doubts you have," Yoda commented, watching the young man closely.

"No, not at all," Luke replied. "I want to be a Jedi more than anything."

Yoda nodded. "Then come to the right place, you have. Come with me, young Luke. Much work we have to do. But first we must eat. Even a Jedi must eat."

Luke smiled. *He's not as bad as I thought he'd be*, he thought, being careful to shield his thoughts from the old Jedi. The thought of a meal appealed to Luke tremendously, and so he

followed the old Jedi through the marsh.

Yoda's home was a small hut in the middle of the swamp. From what Luke could tell, it had two rooms, a main one with a fire in the middle of it and a smaller one where Luke assumed the old Jedi slept. There was a pot suspended over a fire with a rather foul smelling concoction in it. Luke, however, was far too hungry to be picky, and far too polite to comment, and so he gratefully accepted a bowl of the peculiar stew when it was offered to him.

Yoda watched the young man as he ate his supper. Luke reminded Yoda very much of Anakin at that same age, in appearance at least. From what he could tell, his demeanor was more like that of his mother. Yoda decided that this was a good thing, for Anakin Skywalker had been a volatile young man, full of anger and fear.

Luke looked up at Yoda. He was surprised that the old Jedi allowed his thoughts to be so easily read. *Perhaps he doesn't know I am capable of reading his thoughts already*, Luke reflected.

"My father has been redeemed," Luke said, watching at the old Jedi for his reaction. "He is Darth Vader no more."

Yoda merely nodded, not giving Luke any indication of whether he was surprised or not. "Unexpected this is," he said.

"Yes, I'm sure it must be," Luke replied. "I suppose everyone had just written him off as a lost cause."

Yoda sensed the flicker of angry resentment in Luke, and it concerned him. "Many crimes your father committed, Luke," he said solemnly. "Immersed in the Darkness he was."

"Yes he was," Luke admitted. 'But not any more.' He looked into the bowl of stew, stirring it around slowly. "I miss him," he said quietly, more to himself than the Yoda.

Yoda was reminded very much of a young boy who was brought before the Jedi Council many years earlier, a frightened little boy who missed his mother desperately.

"A Jedi must not allow personal attachments get in the way of his training," Yoda told him.

Luke looked up at Yoda, his blue eyes sparkling with anger. "Is that what you told my father when he dreamed about my mother dying?" he asked bitterly.

Yoda remembered when Anakin had come to him, terrified and shaken by visions of someone dying, someone he loved. And what had his advice been? *You must learn to let go of those you most fear to lose...*

He hadn't realized at the time that Anakin had been speaking of his wife.

"Your father knew the commitment of the Jedi Order," Yoda countered. "Ignored them, he did. Arrogant he was to think he could do so without paying a price."

Yoda's words only served to anger Luke more.

"Do you know what brought him out of the Darkness?" Luke asked at last.

Yoda did not reply, and so Luke continued. "He found my sister and me," he told him. 'His love for us brought him back, Yoda. And our love for him. So perhaps the notion that a Jedi should have no personal attachments is just plain wrong,' he said, not caring if he shocked the old Jedi. "And perhaps if you had realized that sooner, my father would not have been destroyed by trying to save the one he loved."

"Your father chose the Dark Side," Yoda replied, growing irritated at the young man's boldness. "Power was what he loved most; do not delude yourself into thinking otherwise."

"My father chose the Dark Side to save my mother," Luke countered angrily. "Out of desperation because he had no where else to turn!"

Yoda did not respond, and merely shook his head in disbelief. *How do you expect me to teach this young one, Obi-Wan? He is so resentful, so angry, so much like his father...*

"Maybe it was a mistake to come here," Luke said, setting his bowl down. "I... I don't know if I can do this."

"Much anger you have in you, young Luke," Yoda said at last, sensing that the young man was starting to calm down. "Understandable this is. But watch that this anger does not turn you into what your father became. The Dark Side feeds on anger, Luke, on hatred and fear. The emperor saw this in your father, and used it against him. Pleased I am that your father has defeated the Darkness within him, unprecedented this is. But the emperor will not allow his defection to go unpunished. Sidious is relentless, ruthless, and will stop at nothing until he destroys his former servant if he believes he has betrayed him. You and your sister would serve his purpose, Luke; nothing would please him more than to turn you or Leia to the Dark Side as punishment for your father's betrayal. Do not allow him the chance to try, Luke; he is very strong. Look what he did to the Chosen One."

Luke nodded, suddenly feeling ashamed for his anger and for his outburst. "I know," he said softly. 'He destroyed the good man my father was. I won't let him win again, Master Yoda,' he vowed, shaking his head. "I won't let the Sith destroy my family again. I want to become a Jedi so that my sister and I can help our father destroy the Sith and its evil master."

Yoda nodded, a flicker of hope growing within him. "A powerful Jedi you will be, Luke," he said. "Just like your father."

Luke smiled. "Thank you, Master Yoda," he replied. "I won't let you down. I promise."

Chapter 41

Chapter 41

The morning is warm, despite the recent rain. Everything is glistening and bright in the morning sun as we head up into the hills behind the estate. Hand in hand we walk, our boots brushing against the tall wet grass. It is so peaceful here, so beautiful and serene. While here it is easy to forget about the war, and simply lose ourselves in the idyllic splendor of this perfect place.

"Now you must be able to smell that," I ask Anakin as we trudge through the damp grass, following the path into the hills.

"All I can smell is wet grass," he replies. "Is that what you mean?"

"No, the air," I tell him. "The air smells...fresher, somehow after it's rained. I love the rain. It's so invigorating to be caught out in the rain. Sola and I used to love splashing in the puddles when we were children."

He smiles. "I wish I could relate. But I can honestly say I've never splashed in a puddle."

"Oh, you don't know what you've missed! I suppose you didn't even know what a puddle was until you left Tatooine."

"No, not a clue," he admits. "Water was the most precious commodity a person could own where I grew up."

"So I suppose the idea of splashing in a puddle must seem terribly frivolous to you then," I ask him. .

. "I didn't say that. On a planet like Naboo water isn't scarce; of course you'd use it for recreation. There's nothing wrong with that."

I watch him for a moment, trying to decide if he's teasing me. "Although I have to admit," he continues, "I am having an awfully hard time imagining the regal and dutiful Queen of Naboo splashing in a puddle."

I laugh. "Well I wasn't queen until I was fourteen," I remind him.

"Yes of course," he replies. "Your splashing days were over by then."

"Stop teasing me, or I won't tell you my secret fantasy."

Now I have his full attention. "Oh?" he says, trying to appear nonchalant. "And what might that be?"

. "I'm not sure I should tell you," I reply, pretending to pout. "You'll probably just tease me if I do."

"I promise not to tease you," he tells me, taking my arm and turning me to face him. "Jedi's honor."

“Very well,” I say, trying to be nonchalant, even though I’m dying to tell him. ‘I have always wanted to make love in the rain,’ I tell him, shocking myself with my disclosure. “So go ahead, tease me.”

“I’m not going to tease you,” he replies with a smile. “I think that’s very sexy.”

“Do you really?”

He nods. “Yes, of course,” he tells me, running his hands down my arms. “I would never tease you about something like that.”

“Just everything else, I reply with a laugh.

“Yes, I suppose you’re right about that,” he replies with a smile. . “How do you put up with me?”

“I really have no idea how,” I tell him, shaking my head. “Come on, let’s keep going.”

We continue to follow the gently winding path up into the hills, stopping at last when we reach the top. The view is spectacular.

“Now, isn’t that beautiful?” I say as we stand and admire the glorious scene below us.

“It is,” he replies, standing behind me and wrapping his arms around my waist. I lean against him, drinking in the masculine scent of him that I adore, loving the power of his embrace.

“I wish we could just stay here forever,” I say as we simply enjoy the beautiful vista before us. “Never return to Coruscant, to the war, to our duties; just remain here and live a quiet life of obscurity.”

“That would be like a dream,” he tells me; pushing my hair away from my neck so he can kiss it. “Do you think anyone would notice if we just disappeared?”

“I’m afraid so,” I tell him with a sigh. ‘You’re the Hero with no Fear, remember, Ani,’?”

“I’d be content just to be your hero, Padmé,” he tells me. “Your love is all I need. The rest doesn’t matter much to me.”

His words move me, and I rest my head against his shoulder. “If only life could be so simple. But I suppose our lives will never be ordinary.”

“No, but while we’re here at least we can pretend,” he tells me.

“Yes, you’re right,” I agree. She turns to him. “Although there is certainly nothing ordinary about you, Anakin Skywalker,” I say, running my hands into his long hair.

He smiles as he wraps his arms around me. “No?”

. “No, not even close,” I reply with a shake of my head.

“Well you wouldn’t be happy with an ordinary man, would you Padmé? You’re rather extraordinary yourself.”

“I wouldn’t be happy with any other man, period,” I tell him. “You are the only man who could make me feel complete. It’s like you are a part of me, Ani. I know that sounds strange,

but that's how I feel."

. "No, not strange at all," he tells me, taking my face in his hands. "I know exactly how you feel, Padmé, because I feel the very same way. You and I were destined to be together, Padmé; it's as though the Force brought us together."

"That's very romantic, Anakin," I tell him, stroking his face softly.

"It's the truth, Padmé, but I'm glad you think so, nonetheless," he replies, drawing me closer to kiss me.

Time stands still when I am in Anakin's arms. There is no war, there are no responsibilities; all that exists is him and I and our love. How easy it would be to just throw all the rest away and stay here forever with him.

Anakin takes his cloak and spreads it down on the wet grass, and then holds his hand out to me. I take his hand and kneel down on the cloak. He kneels down before me, leaning towards me to kiss me. I wrap my arms around his neck and kiss him back as our bodies meet in a heated embrace. He takes me in his arms and lowers me gently onto me back, his mouth never leaving mine. He braces himself on either side of me with his arms, and look into my eyes.

"You never cease to amaze me," he tells me, running his fingers through my hair.

"What makes you say that?"

"You're so...naughty," he tells me with a grin. "I never know what to expect from you."

"Does that shock you?" I ask him with a smile.

"Maybe just a little, but I love it. You drive me mad when you look at me like that."

"Like this?" I ask, tracing a finger over his lips.

"Yeah, just like that," he tells me, and then brings his mouth down to mine...

Padmé woke up suddenly, the images from the dream she'd been having affecting her greatly. She sat up in her bed as the memories of that incredible afternoon bombarded her. It had always been one of her fantasies to have her husband make love to her in the rain; and that afternoon Anakin had done just that.

The longing that she felt for him that had been building for the past weeks was only augmented by the dream, reminding her all too well of the incredible physical relationship she'd had with Anakin. She put her face in her hands, trying to stop the pounding of her heart, trying to suppress the longings she was feeling running rampant through her. But every time she closed her eyes, the images from her dream returned, vivid and incredibly sensual. And then she made a decision. Getting out of her bed, she headed for the door.

*Padmé headed for the room down the corridor, heart pounding in her chest. She reached the door, and for a moment, began to have second thoughts. But then she remembered the dream, remembered the incredible passion between them, and pushed forward. Turning the old fashioned door handle, she entered Anakin's room. She stood for a moment, allowing her eyes to adjust to the darkness, trying to determine if he was asleep. *He's snoring*, she thought to herself with a smile, the sound of it bringing back a wave of memories.*

Padmé closed the door, and then silently made her way over to the bed. *I've done this before*, she thought to herself as she climbed onto the foot of the bed. Stealthily she crept up the bed towards him. He was sleeping on his back, which always made him snore, and which enabled her to crawl right on top of him without disturbing his sleep. Bracing her hands on either side of his head, she looked down at him, loving the sight of him as he slept. Her memories of him were so vivid at that moment, that they almost overwhelmed her in their intensity. She bent to him and kissed his mouth softly, and then pulled back and looked down at him again. He had stirred, ever so little when she'd kissed him. She smiled, and kissed him again, this time with more intensity. Running her hands into his hair, she lowered her body onto his, feeling him starting to respond to her kiss. Instinctively, he brought his arms around her, holding her body next to his as he kissed her back with equal intensity.

This is a dream, Anakin thought, *it has to be...* and so long as he believed it to be a dream, it was okay to allow what was happening to take its natural course.

Padmé broke their kiss, and then he felt her move to his throat, kissing a line from his jaw down to his chest as her hands moved over the muscular tautness of his chest.

This can't be a dream, the small part of Anakin's brain that was still capable of rational thought reasoned. *This is too real...*

"Padmé?" he said, opening his eyes as Padmé moved back up to look at him.

"Shh," she said, putting a finger over his lips. "No talking, I'm tired of talking. I'd rather do this," bringing her mouth down to his again. Anakin knew that this was no dream, but he was beyond caring at this point. The feeling of being with her was too incredible to care; his need for her was too great to care about anything but what was happening between them. He wrapped his arms tightly around her as his mouth devoured hers with a hunger filled kiss.

"Anakin," she sighed as he brought his mouth to her neck, finding the spot he knew drove her mad. He was desperate to touch every part of her, to quench the longings of twenty years without her.

Later on, they lay in one another's arms, fulfilled and drowsy.

"That was incredible," Anakin said, running a finger down her face slowly.

Padmé nodded. "Yes it was," she agreed.

Anakin smiled. "I love you," he said as he pulled her close to him.

Padmé snuggled up to him as he pulled the blanket over them. "I love you too," she said. Within a few moments, they were asleep, contented and warm in one another's embrace.

Star Destroyer Executor

Admiral Piett stood on the bridge of his new command, deep in thought. He had been heavily involved in the search for the Rebel base as Ozzel's first officer. Now that he was in command, he had devoted as much manpower as he could to solving the mystery of the Rebels' whereabouts. Piett had always enjoyed a good mystery, and this one was the best he'd ever wrapped his mind around.

While it had seemed a ridiculous notion at the time, Ferreus may have inadvertently stumbled onto something when he suggested monitoring the broadcast channels. Granted it

was more than likely that he had been given the order from the emperor; Ferreus himself was not nearly intelligent enough to come up with such a plan.

Since the communication officers had concentrated their efforts on monitoring the channels, a rather interesting pattern had emerged. While the vast majority of the activity they had monitored was easily recognizable, there was a small percentage that was not. The messages were scrambled, their contents indecipherable. But it was not the content that interested Piett.

A number of messages had been traced either as originating from or bound for a most unlikely source. The Hoth System was located in the Granita Cluster, in the Hoth Quadrant of the Anoat Sector. It consisted of six planets, none of which were habitable by humans. And yet, the messages were clearly emanating from the sixth planet of this system. Someone was there, someone who was both receiving and transmitting messages on a regular basis.

"Admiral Piett, another one," the communication officer on the bridge informed his commanding officer. "This one was sent to Naboo."

Piett nodded. "Like the last one," he said thoughtfully. He had instructed his men to focus their attention on the Hoth System since discovering the bizarre pattern of communication centered on this remote ice world.

"Perhaps it's time we ought to have a closer look at this planet," Piett decided at last. "Send a probe droid there at once."

"We have thousands of probe droids searching already," Reyal reminded him.

"Yes we do," Piett replied. "But it could take months before one reaches the Hoth System. We need answers now."

Reyal nodded. "I'll see to it personally, Admiral."

Naboo-Lake Retreat

Anakin woke up several hours later, his arms still wrapped around Padmé. He was confused for a moment that she was in his bed, and then he remembered how she had seduced him. He had thought it was a dream at first, but soon it had become apparent within short order that it was not; but by then it was too late to put a halt to what was happening between them. Making love to his wife after nearly twenty years without her was incredible, more incredible than he had even remembered. And while he certainly had no regrets, he knew that things had been tremendously complicated by what had transpired between them. He had promised Padmé that he would tell her everything in the morning; how would she feel about what had transpired when she he did? *I tried to stay away... I tried to resist her... but she made it impossible, surely she will see that, surely she will understand...*

"Good morning," Padmé said as she stretched languidly. She snuggled up to Anakin, reaching up to run her hands into his hair. "Last night was incredible," she told him with a smile.

Anakin smiled, wrapping his arms around her waist. "Yes it was," he said. "It can't believe it really happened."

"It's been so long," she said, stroking his face gently.

Anakin nodded. "Yes, it has," he replied.

Padmé could see that something was troubling him, and she was confused by it. "Anakin, what is wrong?" she asked. "You seem in a world of your own."

"I'm just thinking about last night," he replied.

She watched him closely, knowing there was more to his distraction.

"You're not regretting what happened, are you Ani?" she asked.

"No, no of course not," he told her earnestly.

"Then what is it?" she asked. She thought for a moment. "Does this have something to do with what you were going to tell me this morning?"

Anakin sighed. "Yes, it has everything to do with it," he said.

Padmé frowned. "Then maybe you ought to just tell me, Anakin. Tell me and get it over with."

"Very well," he replied. "That is what I will do."

Chapter 42

Chapter 42

Where do I begin? Anakin thought as he moved to the edge of the bed. He reached under the bedclothes and retrieved his sleep pants and slipped them on.

“Well?” she said. “I’m waiting.”

Anakin stood up and commenced pacing about the room. “It all began the day that you told me you were pregnant,” he began. “Do you remember that day?”

Padmé nodded. “Yes, I do,” she said. “You said it was the happiest day of your life.”

“And it was,” he said, turning back to her. “Until that night, when I began to dream of you dying in childbirth.”

“I remember,” she said. “But what does that have to do with...”

“Everything,” he said. “I became so obsessed with finding a way to save you that I allowed myself to be manipulated by Sidious, Dark Lord of the Sith, who lead me to believe that only though the Dark Side could I save you from dying.”

“The Dark Side?” Padmé asked, sitting up in the bed. “You mean... you became a Sith to try to prevent me from dying? I don’t understand, Ani, you were a Jedi. I remember that, I remember you being a hero in the war... what are you saying?”

“I’m saying that I betrayed the Jedi,” he said, confessing his crime for the first time. “I helped the Sith destroy them.”

“Destroy them how?” she asked, beginning to grow alarmed.

He turned back to her, the screams of younglings, and the sight of their faces flashing through his mind. “I killed them, Padmé,” he told her. “I slaughtered them, hundreds of them, many of them younglings. Sidious told me that in order for me to save you, I needed to be strong with the Dark Side. Killing the Jedi drove me further into the Darkness, so far that I was unreachable.”

Flashes of memory began to assault Padmé as she listened in silent horror to his narrative. She saw Obi-Wan, his eyes full of sadness, his voice cracking with anguish as he told her... what was it that he had said? What were the words that had shattered her world? ***I have seen a security hologram of him killing younglings... He was deceived by a lie. We all were. It appears that the Chancellor is behind everything, including the war. Palpatine is the Sith Lord we’ve been looking for. After the death of Count Dooku, Anakin became his new apprentice...***

Padmé became cold all of a sudden, and pulled the blanket up around her bare shoulders as she looked up at him, knowing there was more to his story, but not certain she had the strength to hear it.

Anakin could see that she was horrified by what he had told her, and he'd barely begun.

"Unreachable? What exactly does that mean?" she asked at last.

Anakin sighed, and ran a hand through his hair. He felt the knots that had been forming within him for weeks now starting to tighten as the moment he'd been dreading was suddenly upon him. "I was sent to the planet Mustafar by my master," he told her. "To kill the Separatists there. While I was still there, you arrived. You had been told by Obi-Wan what I had done, and you wanted me to tell you that it wasn't true..."

"Mustafar?" she asked, getting out of the bed slowly, wrapping the blanket around herself. She stared at him as she images started to coalesce in her mind, images too horrible to speak of, so horrible that her mind had refused them entry, blocking out an entire life time of memories in order to keep them at bay. But now they crashed upon her, relentless and unstoppable

I don't believe what I'm hearing . . . Obi-Wan was right. You've changed!

I don't want to hear any more about Obi-Wan. The Jedi turned against me. Don't you turn against me!

I don't know you anymore. Anakin, you're breaking my heart! I'll never stop loving you, but you are going down a path I can't follow.

Because of Obi-Wan?

Because of what you've done . . . what you plan to do. Stop, stop now. Come back! I love you.

Liar!

No!

You're with him. You've betrayed me! You brought him here to kill me!

NO! Anakin.... I swear... I...

Padmé's hands went to her throat as she remembered, at last, what Anakin had done next. "You... you tried to kill me!" she said quietly, her dark eyes full of pain and sorrow. "You tried to choke me to death, and would have done so if Obi-Wan hadn't stopped you!!"

"Padmé, Angel," he began, walking over to her. "That moment was a mistake, a horrible, senseless mistake... I..."

"A mistake?" she cried. "Is that what you call trying to kill your pregnant wife?? A mistake?"

Anakin shook his head. "Padmé, please," he began, "I was mad, I didn't know what I was doing! You mean more to me than anything in the galaxy! I never would have..."

"Stop, just stop right there," she said, putting her hand up and backing away from him. "Don't come any closer... don't touch me, don't even come close to me!"

Anakin felt as though his heart were rending in two. "Padmé, please," he begged her. "Please try to understand; I have regretted that moment every day since it happened! I have

hated myself every day for what I did to you! You must know in your heart how much I love you!”

Padmé shook her head. “I don’t know anything,” she said bitterly. “I can’t believe you allowed what happened last night between us before I knew what happened!”

“How did you expect me to stop what was happening?” he demanded in frustration. “You seduced me! I have tried to resist you for weeks now because I wanted to tell you the whole truth first before we...”

“If that were true you would have stopped me,” she said angrily. “You wanted it to happen as much as I did! Don’t deny that!”

“Of course I won’t deny it!” he replied. “I have always wanted you, Padmé, that has never changed! But I knew that it would be wrong to take our relationship to that level without you knowing the truth.”

“You didn’t have any trouble last night,” she retorted, turning away from him. She closed her eyes as the tears started rolling down her cheeks. ‘How could you, Anakin?’ she asked softly, her heart aching. “How could you do that to me? How could you betray me that way? I have spent the past twenty years alone without my children because of what you did on that day! You stole my children from me! You stole twenty years of my life from me! Twenty years that I will never get back!”

Anakin didn’t know what to say, what could he say? What defense could he offer for what he had done? She was right, after all; he had taken so much from her. And no matter what he did now, no matter how much he loved her, those years were gone, and no amount of love or apology would bring them back.

“I know how angry you are,” Anakin said at last. “And you have every right to be. But surely you can see that I have changed, Padmé; I am not the same man who committed those heinous crimes, who betrayed you in such an unconscionable manner. I love you, Padmé! My life these past twenty years without you has been a living hell! Had I known that you lived, I...”

“What have you been doing for the past twenty years?” she asked. “You became a Sith — so obviously you have been a part of the Empire, right?”

“Yes, that is right,” he replied.

“So you have been doing your best to persecute our children?” she asked. “You’ve been helping the Empire to crush the Rebellion?”

“Yes, that was my mandate,” he said. “But once I realized that Leia was my child, I abandoned the Empire, Padmé. I rescued Leia from the Death Star; I helped the Rebellion destroy the Death Star. Surely you can see that I have changed, that there is no trace of Darth Vader left within me.”

Padmé’s eyes widened in shock at his words. “You... you’re Darth Vader?” she asked.

Anakin cast his eyes down to the floor. “Yes, for twenty years I was,” he admitted. “I wasn’t sure you’d heard of him, having been in that institution for all those years.”

"I have," she said, trying to process the information her mind was refusing to believe. "How could you be Darth Vader? He was a cyborg... a monster, a murderer!"

"I was injured on Mustafar, and nearly died," he told her. "The mask and breath suit was the only way I could live. I recently had massive surgery to repair my injuries; Sidious had lied to me when he told me that they were irreparable. He lied to me about everything, Padmé, everything! I sacrificed everything to save you, and it was all for nothing!"

Padmé turned away from him, unable to face him any longer. "I... I can't deal with all of this," she said numbly. "It's too much. I... I need to get away from here," she said, heading for the door.

"Padmé, please," Anakin said, trying to block her way. "Don't leave!"

She looked up at him, and in her eyes he could see the depth of her pain, her resentment and disillusionment. "Move aside, Anakin," she said quietly.

"I'm begging you," he said, "please..."

"I begged you once, Anakin," she told him coldly. "I begged you to abandon the Dark Side and come away with me to raise our child— but you chose the Dark Side over me and our baby, our babies. Stand aside, Anakin. I'm leaving."

Anakin had no choice but to move aside so that she could pass. He watched her as she ran down the corridor and into her own room, followed by the slamming of her door. He turned back to the room where just mere hours ago everything had seemed so perfect. Something caught his eye and he walked over to the bed. Bending down he picked up the black negligee that she had been wearing when she had come into his room the previous night. Sitting down on the edge of the bed, he brought the garment to his face, the scent of her surrounding him, making his agony even greater. Burying his face in the nightie, he gave in to his grief and wept.

Chapter 43

Chapter 43

Padmé willed herself not to look back at the house as the gondola made its way over the lake. She knew that Anakin was watching her; she could feel his eyes upon her. It wasn't that she had doubts about her course of action; but she just couldn't bear to see him, couldn't bear to see the look in his eyes. *I loved you, how could you do this to me?* She thought in anguish, her heart aching. *How could you betray me that way?*

Padmé had resolved to return to Theed, to her mother's home. From there, she had no idea what would come next. All she knew at this point was that she needed to put some distance between she and Anakin in order to sort through all that she had learned. *Do the children know about all this? Do they know that their father was Darth Vader?* They must, she reasoned; Anakin had told her that he had saved Leia from the Death Star. *And yet they have accepted him, they love him... I love him too, this wouldn't be so painful if I didn't.*

Almost as though she was incapable of controlling her actions, Padmé turned back to look at the house once more before it disappeared from view. Sure enough, she could see Anakin standing on the terrace, watching her. The sight of him only made her misery greater, and caused fresh tears to flow. She turned away, forcing herself to be strong, and did her best to put the image of his face from her mind.

Anakin watched until the gondola turned and disappeared from sight. The anguish that had filled him was slowly morphing into something darker, something volatile. *You did this to me, Sidious*, he thought angrily. *You took her from me, just as you did twenty years ago. This time I will make you pay for it... no matter what it takes, I will see to it that you pay...*

Dagobah

Luke ran through the swamp, feeling his heart hammering within his chest, his master strapped to his back. Every so often the rough terrain required him to jump over an exposed root, or leap over a large puddle, and he did so with grace and agility.

"Run! Yes," Yoda encouraged. "A Jedi's strength flows from the Force. But beware of the dark side. Anger... fear... aggression. The dark side of the Force are they. Easily they flow, quick to join you in a fight."

"Is the Dark Side stronger?" Luke asked, stopping to catch his breath.

"No," Yoda replied immediately. "Quicker, easier, more seductive."

Luke nodded. "But... how am I to know the good side from the bad? My father was destroyed by the Dark Side, did he truly know what was happening to him?"

Yoda sighed. "Chose the Dark Side, your father did," he told Luke.

"To save my mother," Luke reminded him. "What choice did he have?"

“Chosen he could have to honor the Jedi code,” Yoda replied. “Personal attachments, forbidden they were. Fearful of losing his mother he was as a boy, fearful of losing his wife as a man. Fear leads to anger, and anger to the Dark Side.”

Luke considered the Jedi’s words. From what he said, it seemed as though Anakin’s destiny had been preordained, that turning to the Dark Side was part of a plan that he had no say in, as though he was merely a player in a play. “Master Yoda, do you think that his turning to the Dark Side was part of the prophecy of the Chosen One?”

“Meditated upon this I have,” Yoda replied. “Unprecedented it is that a Sith return to the Light. Highly possible it is that in order to defeat the Sith, the Chosen One must first become a Sith.”

Luke nodded. He wanted to ask Yoda a question, but was almost afraid to hear the answer. Yet, he needed to know.

“Master Yoda, do you think it’s possible that my father could turn back to the Dark Side?” he asked at last as he gently set Yoda back down on the muddy ground.

“Difficult to see, the future is,” Yoda replied. “Convinced you are of your father’s redemption? Rejected the Dark Side utterly he has?”

“I believe he has, yes,” Luke replied. “And so does Obi-Wan. I think now that my father has seen the destructiveness of the Dark Side, he will not let it into his heart again.”

Yoda nodded. “Let us hope not, young Luke,” he said at last. “A powerful Sith Vader was. Now that he has been fully restored, he would be unstoppable.”

Yoda’s words chilled Luke. *He will not allow the Dark Side to triumph*, he thought resolutely. *He will not let it destroy him again.*

“Come,” Yoda said, seeing that Luke was becoming mired in his own thoughts. “Time for saber practice, it is.”

Sixth Planet of the Hoth System

The tauntaun beneath her stomped her hoof impatiently, anxious to be on her way. Leia patted the beast’s long neck reassuringly. “I’m as eager to get back to the base as you are,” she told her mount. “But we haven’t made all the checks yet, girl. Han will be contacting us soon.”

The tauntaun snorted through her nostrils in response, causing Leia to smile. The Rebels had discovered a number of indigenous creatures over the course of the past few weeks, some of them too dangerous to consider taming, while others, like the tauntauns, were proving to be useful and even pleasant companions. Their ability to tolerate the cold and traverse even the deepest snow made them invaluable to the scouts whose job it was each day to check for any sign of Imperial presence. Leia had grown up with a pony of her own, so she was already quite an accomplished rider. Granted, a tauntaun was quite a different beast, but it didn’t take her long to get the hang of it.

“Echo Seven to Echo Two, do you read me?”

Leia brushed the snow from her comlink and activated it. “I read you, Han. Anything to report?”

“Hell no,” Han replied. “Lots of snow, plenty of ice... that’s about it.”

“Okay,” Leia said. “Let’s get back to base.”

“Sounds good to me,” Han replied. “I’ll meet you there.”

Leia nudged her tauntaun into motion with a light kick on the beast’s hindquarters. Only too happy to comply, she took off at a trot, kicking up snow as she did so. Leia held onto the reins tightly with one hand as she pulled her muffler up over her face to shield her from the bitter cold wind. Suddenly a strange feeling came over her, a feeling of tremendous anxiety, as though she was anticipating something dreadful. *It’s Father*, she thought as she focused her mind, *he’s in pain; terrible pain...* Leia frowned, her father’s pain becoming her own. *What has happened?* She wondered, and then she realized what it must be. *He told Mother about Mustafar*, she thought. *She knows...*

Giving her animal another nudge, she urged her to go a little faster. *I have to talk to him*, Leia thought anxiously. *I have to make sure he’s alright.*

Leia rubbed her hands together to warm them as she sat at the comm. screen in her quarters. *Who says rank doesn’t have privilege?* She reflected with a smile as she thought back to how she had convinced General Dodonna that she, as a member of the Senate and a princess ought to have her own personal communication station. *If he knew who my real father was, he never would have agreed to it...*

Leia waited impatiently for one of her parents to respond to her hail. She had calculated the time difference, and reasoned that it was not nighttime there, it was not even midday. *So where are they?*

Finally she saw Anakin appear, and relaxed. However, when she saw the look in his eyes, the anxiety returned. It still amazed her that she had been able to sense his distress from clear across the galaxy.

“What’s wrong?” she asked without preamble.

“She knows,” he told her simply.

“Mother?”

Anakin nodded.

“She didn’t take it well, then,” Leia said, stating the obvious.

“That is an understatement,” Anakin replied. “She is furious, hurt, resentful....not that I can blame her. She has every right to feel that way.”

Leia nodded. “Yes, she does,” she agreed. ‘But she loves you, Dad,’ she reminded him. “She will get past her anger.”

“I don’t know, Leia,” Anakin replied. “I’ve never seen her so upset. She has gone back to Theed, she can’t even stand to be around me.”

“Well maybe that’s for the best,” Leia said, trying her best to make the situation more bearable for her father. “Give her some space and some time, and she’ll come around.”

Anakin sighed. "I don't know," he said, shaking his head. "You didn't see the look in her eyes, Leia. She may never come back to me. I may have lost her forever."

"No, I won't accept that," Leia replied with a frown. "I know she loves you, Dad. The way she looks at you makes it plain to see. Once she has time to think about everything, she will see that you took a tremendous risk in helping her regain her memory. You knew that she would remember everything sooner or later, and yet you were still determined to help her do so. That says a lot about the sort of man you are."

"Perhaps," he concurred, looking down at his hands folded on top of the desk. "Perhaps she will never want to see me again."

Leia looked at her father, her heart aching for him. "I'm sorry," she said softly. "I wish I was there for you right now."

Anakin looked up at her. "You are," he told her with a smile. "You always seem to know when I need to see your face."

Leia smiled. "I knew you were feeling down," she told him. "I just sensed it. I'm sorry you are, but I'm confident that she will forgive you in time."

"How can you be so sure?" he asked.

"I have foreseen it," she told him with a smile.

Anakin laughed, surprising himself. "Do you know how much I love you, Leia?" he told her.

Leia nodded, trying not to let herself get emotional. "I think so," she said. "But it's nice to hear it all the same. I love you too, Dad."

Dagobah

Luke woke up in the middle of the night from a very vivid dream. He had been dreaming of his father. *Something is wrong*, Luke thought as he sat up in his sleeping bag. *Something is very wrong...*

Chapter 44

Chapter 44

Padmé arrived in Theed later that afternoon. She had been considering her options throughout the long trip, and had made a decision.

Jobal was shocked to see her younger daughter walk through the door, particularly since she was alone.

“Padmé! What are you doing here?” Jobal asked, walking over to meet her. “Where is Anakin?”

“He’s still up at the lake retreat,” Padmé replied. ‘I’ve left him, Mum,’ she told her. “I remember everything now, and I don’t want anything to do with him.”

Jobal frowned “What?” she cried. “I don’t understand! What happened? What did you remember that was so terrible that you’d leave the man you so obviously adore?”

Padmé did not reply at first, but Jobal could see in her eyes how devastated she was.

“Padmé, what is it?” Jobal asked gently, taking her daughter’s hand. “Tell me what happened.”

“Oh Mum,” Padmé said as the tears filled her eyes. “He... I...” she put her face in her hands and broke down, the grief finally getting the better of her.

Jobal wrapped her arms around her daughter and held her close as she wept; knowing that right now that was all she needed. In time Padmé would calm down enough to tell her what happened, but for now, she just needed her mother, and a shoulder to cry on.

“Here now,” Jobal said a little while later, handing Padmé a cup of tea. ‘A good cup of tea is always good for what ails you,’ she said with a smile. She sat down with her daughter. “Do you feel like talking now?”

Padmé sipped at the hot tea. “I think so,” she said finally. She sighed, and then looked up at her mother. ‘I know now why I had amnesia,’ she said. “I know what happened to me on the day the twins were born.”

Jobal nodded. “I see,” she replied. “Does it have something to do with Anakin?”

“Yes,” Padmé said quietly, staring back down into her cup. “It has everything to do with him. He... he tried to kill me, Mum. On the day the twins were born, Anakin choked me.”

Jobal could not respond for a moment, her daughter’s words had shocked her so. “What?” she cried. “He *choked* you?? Padmé, you can’t be remembering correctly! Anakin loves you! He would never do such a thing!”

“I thought that too,” Padmé replied. ‘But it’s true, Mum. He turned on me, he thought I’d betrayed him, and he tried to kill me for it.’ She looked back up at her mother. “There’s so much about him you don’t know, Mum,” she said. “So much I didn’t remember until just

today. He turned to the Dark Side, and for the past twenty years he has been Darth Vader. He was instrumental in the slaughter of the Jedi, he has committed such acts of cruelty and barbarism..." she stood up, becoming agitated again. "And he tried to kill me... while I was carrying his children."

Jobal sat in stunned, horrified silence. "Oh, Padmé," she said at last, feeling a chill go down her spine. "I... I don't understand any of this! How can that good, decent man who was here just days ago be Darth Vader? Why would he go to all the trouble to take you out of that place and help you remember your past if he had done all those things? Surely he knew you would remember them too."

Padmé had thought of that, and she was at a loss to understand why he had wanted her to regain her memory if that memory entailed Mustafar. "I don't know," she said at last. 'I don't begin to understand. All I know is he stole twenty years of my life from me,' she said bitterly. "And robbed me of my children. My children, who I have not seen since they were seconds old."

"I'm so sorry," Jobal said, looking up at her with tears in her eyes. "I can only imagine how you must feel. What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to find my children," Padmé said turning to her mother. "I need them, Mum, now more than ever."

Jobal nodded. "Yes, of course you do, just as they need you. Where will you go to find them?"

"They are not together right now, unfortunately," Padmé replied. "Luke is on Dagobah, which is closer. I will go there first. I will not let any more time slip away from me, Mum. Too much time has been lost, time that I could have spent with my babies. It is time to be a mother to them."

Jobal smiled. "Now that sounds like the Padmé I know and love."

Padmé spent a restless night in her old bedroom. The images from that horrible day on Mustafar bombarded her relentlessly. *No wonder I blocked out what happened on that day...* she reflected as she tossed and turned in her bed. *I wish I could do so now...*

Finally sleep came, but it was a restive sleep, rife with images of her husband's face. She didn't realize it but in her sleep she called his name several times, just as she had in the days following the birth of their twins. Their one night together had unlocked the memories of so many nights just like that one, and they were like torture to her now. Her mind could not reconcile the man she remembered from those tender moments with the monster who had turned to her with murder in his eyes and in his heart. *Who are you, Skywalker or Vader? Jedi or Sith? Lover or monster?*

Padmé was not the only one who spent a restless night. Anakin had wandered aimlessly around the lake retreat for the rest of the day, feeling lost and alone. *Where do I go now?* He wondered. *What is the purpose of my life now that my angel has rejected me?* The thought of joining the Rebel Alliance had crossed his mind; it would be perfect revenge against the Empire and its loathsome emperor to add his enormous strength to theirs. Yet, given the way he was treated the last time he was in their midst, it wasn't too likely that they would welcome his assistance. *So where then? Where?*

Sleep was hard to come by that night; the memories of his wife were too fresh in his mind to allow it. The memories of the previous night were like torture to him now, and he cursed himself for his weakness. Perhaps if things had not escalated to that point her anger would not have been so great. *But how was I to resist her? After twenty years without her, how could I possibly stop what happened?* He hadn't wanted to stop it, if he was to be totally truthful. He had wanted her from the moment he first saw her wandering in the gardens of the institution she was in. It had been exceedingly difficult to resist her all this time. But he had, because deep down he knew that this would happen, that she would be furious and push him away. And that is exactly what had happened.

At least I have my children, Anakin thought as he tossed and turned in the large, lonely bed. *Leia... my sweet Leia, what would I do without you?* He realized that were it not for his daughter, he may have spent the rest of his life in darkness. Her acceptance of him, her faith in his humanity had been key to his redemption. She loved him, warts and all, and it was that love that kept him from slipping. *Can Padmé find that sort of acceptance in her heart? Can she learn to love me again after everything I did to her?*

Anakin reached over to the second pillow in his bed, and pulled something out from under it. It was the negligee that Padmé had worn the previous night. He brought it to his face, trying to capture the scent of her on its silken fabric. Closing his eyes, he kept the garment close to his face as he drifted into a restless sleep.

Star Destroyer Executor

Firmus Piett had always been a man who valued his honor above all else. For him, a man without honor was a man who could not be trusted. Darth Ferreus was such a man. And now Piett found himself in the unenviable position of having to answer directly to him, to do his best to appear to respect a man whom he secretly despised.

Ozzel had despised Ferreus; but he had been open about it, and it had cost him his life. Piett was not about to make that same mistake. If he had learned anything in his years as an Imperial officer, it was how to hide his true feelings. This skill would serve him well now, of that he was certain.

Another message had been detected originating in the Hoth System. Piett was by now certain that the probe droid they had sent out days earlier would give them the proof he needed, proof of the existence of a Rebel base in that system. He had not yet informed Ferreus of his suspicions; the last thing he needed was to be proven wrong and have Ferreus decide to 'punish' him for his error. No, he had decided to wait and see. Should he prove to be correct, then he would inform the Dark Lord.

After all, it did not seem like Ferreus was particularly interested anyway, he spent such little time on the bridge. Perhaps he felt now that Ozzel was dead, and had been made an example to the rest of the crew, he could continue his life of ill repute without fear of anyone spying on him.

"Admiral, I think we've got something sir," Captain Reyal informed Piett as the admiral arrived at the bridge. "The report is only a fragment, but it's the best lead we've had."

"From the Hoth System?" Piett asked.

"Yes sir," Reyal replied. "I think we've got them, sir."

Piett nodded, and then followed Reyal to a monitor where the faint yet recognizable image of a power generator was seen amidst the blowing snows of the sixth planet of the system. A power generator could only mean one thing: humans.

"I think you're right," Piett said. "Set your course for the Hoth System at once, Reyal, and have General Veers ready his troops."

"Right away sir!"

Naboo-Naberrie Home

Padmé woke up early the next morning. It had been a rough night for her; what little sleep she had managed to get was full of Anakin, which made putting him out of her mind next to impossible.

Ryoo was already up and eating breakfast when Padmé entered the kitchen.

"Good morning," Ryoo said. "How are you this morning?"

"I'm alright," Padmé said, kissing her niece on the cheek. "Didn't sleep much, though."

"I'm not surprised," Ryoo replied. "Grandmum told me what happened. I'm so sorry, Auntie Padmé."

Padmé merely nodded as she poured herself a cup of tea.

"What are you going to do?" Ryoo asked as Padmé joined her at the table.

"I'm going to see my children," Padmé told her. "I'm leaving this morning for Dagobah."

"Dagobah?" Ryoo asked. "That's nothing but back water, a big swamp."

Padmé nodded as she sipped her tea. "Yes, but it is also where my son is training to be a Jedi," she replied. "And I have been apart from my children too long, Ryoo. I won't let another day pass without being with at least one of them."

"Where is Leia?" Ryoo asked.

"She is with the Rebel Alliance," Padmé explained. "In the Hoth System. I'm not sure going there would be wise; I would hate to be the reason they are discovered by the Empire."

"Perhaps you can arrange to meet her elsewhere," suggested Ryoo. "I'm sure she is as anxious to meet you as you are to meet her."

"Yes, I know she is," Padmé replied.

Ryoo studied her aunt, wanting to ask her something, but not wishing to upset her.

"Can I ask you something?" Ryoo said at last.

"Of course," Padmé replied. "What is it?"

"How do you know when you're in love?" she asked. "I think I may love Jarred, but I'm not sure."

Padmé smiled. "There's no mistaking that feeling, Ryoo," she replied. "How do you feel when you're around him?"

Ryoo thought for a moment, a dreamy expression in her eyes. “Well, I feel sort of tingly inside, almost like butterflies. Sometimes I can’t stop thinking about him, sometimes just the sight of him makes me giggle like an idiot... when I’m not with him, I feel like... like...”

“Like a part of you is missing?” Padmé offered.

Ryoo nodded. “Yes, that’s it exactly!” she replied. She sighed. “Does that sound like love to you?”

Padmé nodded. “Yes,” she replied softly. “It does.”

Ryoo could tell that Padmé was thinking of her husband, and regretted bringing the whole subject up. “I’m sorry,” she said. “It was thoughtless of me to ask you such a thing right now.”

“Don’t apologize,” Padmé replied, standing up to refresh her cup. “I know exactly what you’re feeling, Ryoo. It’s a beautiful thing to be falling in love.”

“You still love him, don’t you?” Ryoo asked.

Padmé looked at her niece as she sat down, startled by her question. Did she love him still? Would his betrayal hurt so much if she didn’t?

“Yes,” Padmé replied at last. “I love him. I think I always will, Ryoo. But that isn’t enough, not after what I learned yesterday.”

Ryoo thought about that for a moment. “Are you sure it isn’t?” she asked as she stood up. ‘Seems to me that the kind of love that exists between the two of you ought to be able to conquer anything.’ She glanced at her wrist chrono. “Time for me to get going,” she said. She bent and kissed her aunt. “Have a safe trip,” she said. “And come home soon.”

“I will,” Padmé said as she watched her niece leave. *Love isn’t enough to save you, Padmé, only my new powers can do that...* Anakin’s words jumped to mind in light of the conversation she’d just had with Ryoo. *Perhaps love might have saved us then, Anakin, but it can’t save us now. Perhaps nothing can.*

Placing her empty cup in the dishwasher, Padmé returned to her room to start packing, pushing the thought of her husband out of her mind again.

Chapter 45

Chapter 45

Planet Dagobah

Luke's day began early, as it always did, with a brisk jog through the swamp. It was an invigorating way to start the day, and Luke found he was actually enjoying the vigorous physical training. Yoda was proving to be a demanding master, pushing Luke to the limits of his physical endurance as well as challenging his mind with the nuances of the Jedi philosophy.

Yoda had been skeptical about training Luke initially. The boy was almost twenty years old, far too old in Yoda's estimation to begin the training. But Luke was the son of the Chosen One; training him as a Jedi was the only way to ensure that he did not fall into the same Darkness that had claimed his father.

Yoda had tested Luke many times, playing the devil's advocate to ascertain where the boy's loyalties were. It was clear that Luke had tremendous admiration for his father, and saw his fall to the Dark Side as tragic and something beyond Anakin's control. This concerned Yoda; for as much as Anakin had been manipulated by Palpatine, there had been a point at which Anakin clearly had chosen the Dark Side, and Luke was unable or perhaps unwilling to see this. So long as Luke remained convinced that free will had nothing to do with Anakin's fall, he would not truly understand that nature of the Darkness that had destroyed him.

As for Luke, it astonished him that the old master was still clinging to the archaic notions that the Jedi Order had held fast to for so many centuries. Didn't Yoda see that it was because of the rigidity of these rules that Anakin had succumbed to the Dark Side? That were it not for the strictness of the Code that Anakin would have been able to seek the help he needed without seeking out the Sith?

Luke found his master standing outside of the small hut he called home. The old Jedi was deep in thought.

"Master Yoda?" Luke said. "Is something wrong?"

Yoda turned and looked up at Luke. "Not wrong," he said. "Unexpected... but not wrong. Stretch out with your feelings, Luke. You will know what I sense."

Luke nodded and closed his eyes, calming himself, opening his mind to the Force. *Someone is here...* he realized at once. *Someone who is looking for me.* He opened his eyes and looked at Yoda. "Who is it?" he asked.

"Let us go and see," he said as he started off. Luke followed his master through the swamp to the only place where a ship could be landed amid the quagmire. A small Nubian vessel had just landed, and the sight of it filled Luke with a strange sense of familiarity. He knew the person in the ship; he could feel the connection with them even before they emerged from the ship. He watched as the hatch opened, as though in slow motion, and a slender figure

emerged, their face obscured by the flight helmet. The person turned and, upon seeing Luke, stopped.

My son, Padmé thought as she stared at the young man looking up at her. The resemblance he bore to Anakin was staggering, and it rendered her speechless for a moment. Realizing he probably had no idea who she was, she took off her helmet, revealing her face to him at last.

Luke smiled, seeing his sister in her face. This was the face he had seen in his dreams, the face that had comforted him as a child when he'd had nightmares. *My mother*, he thought as a constriction formed in his throat, preventing him from speaking.

"Senator Amidala," Yoda said at last, smiling at her. "Seeing you again after so many years warms my heart."

Padmé tore her eyes away from her son to look at Yoda. "It is good to see you again as well, Yoda," she said, speaking for the first time. She carefully made her way down the nose of her ship and jumped into the water. Luke watched as she gracefully swam to the shore, and ran over to meet her on her other side.

"Mother!" he said simply, throwing his arms around her, not caring if he was becoming as wet as she was in the process.

"Luke," Padmé replied, holding him tightly. "At last!"

Yoda watched the emotional reunion of mother and son. Padmé's arrival here was most unexpected, and it would no doubt distract Luke from his training. But he felt that it was the least he owed them, having separated them all those years ago.

"I hope you don't mind me showing up here unannounced," Padmé said at last. "I simply had to see you, Luke."

Luke shook his head. "Mind?" he asked. "Of course I don't mind! I've been dying to meet you!"

Padmé smiled. "My son, my beautiful son," she said touching his face lightly. "You look so much like your father," she added, the thought of him bringing a touch of sadness to her eyes.

"Where is he? Where is my father?" Luke asked. "He isn't with you?"

Padmé shook her head. "No," she replied. "I'm afraid not."

Luke frowned. "You know, don't you?" he asked, realizing that she had learned the truth about Mustafar. "You know what happened on the day Leia and I were born."

"Yes, I know everything now," Padmé replied quietly.

"Let us go to my home," Yoda said at last. "A warm fire is what you need, Senator. Tired you must be."

"Not tired, Yoda," Padmé replied. "Just anxious to see my children," she added, looking back at Luke and taking his hand.

Luke smiled. "Come with me," he said. "We have so much to talk about."

Naboo-Lake Retreat

Anakin had never liked the rain much; but at this particular moment, he detested it. A steady downpour had prevented him from leaving the lake retreat, and he was beginning to climb the walls.

Not that he really had any place to go; he was a man in limbo at the moment. He was sorely tempted to go to Theed, where he suspected Padmé had gone. He had not seen her in nearly forty-eight hours, and missed her terribly.

Despite her anger, Anakin knew that she loved him. He only hoped that love would be enough to enable her to forgive him. But in order for her to do that, Anakin realized that he needed to give her time. He had never been a patient man, but knew that right now that was what he needed to be. Padmé would not appreciate him showing up at her mother's home, not right now. No, she needed time and room to assimilate all that she had learned. It was a lot to deal with at once; her reaction had been completely natural. Anakin could only hope that given time to put everything into perspective she would realize that he was no longer the monster who had attacked her all those years ago, that all he wanted now was to make amends for his crimes and to cherish the family he had been estranged from for so long.

I just hope that you know, Anakin, that no matter what you tell me, it won't change the way I feel about you. I hope you realize that, and know how much I love you...

Padmé had said mere days ago. *Did you mean it, Angel?* He thought to himself. *Or is this just too much to forgive?*

Theed was out; Hoth was another possibility, however. Anakin wanted desperately to see his daughter. Yet, he felt that his presence there would raise too many questions, and he did not want to put Leia through that again. That left only one place: Dagobah. *Master Yoda would be thrilled to see me, I'm sure*, he thought wryly. No doubt the Jedi Master would be shocked to learn of his transformation, his redemption. *Will he accept that I've changed? Or will he refuse to believe that I could after what I did?* Anakin decided that Yoda's opinion of him was irrelevant: he needed to see his son, and that is just what he would do. *Luke needs his father and I need my son... if Yoda doesn't like it, that's just too bloody bad*, he decided at last.

Having made his mind up, he returned to the window, doing his best to remain patient until the rain stopped.

Sixth Planet of the Hoth System

I'll have to remember to thank the genius who thought this ice cube would make a good location for a base, Han Solo thought irritably as he sat atop his tauntaun surveying the bleak landscape around him.

Han had begun to get restless here, the rigidity of the quasi-military lifestyle chafed against his sense of adventure and independence. If it weren't for Princess Leia, he'd have taken off weeks earlier. He just couldn't bring himself to leave, despite the fact that he knew Jabba the Hutt had undoubtedly set an enormous bounty on his head.

Soon, he kept telling himself, *soon*. But when Luke had departed for Dagobah, the princess had become so miserable without her twin that Han didn't have the heart to leave her. As much as he hated to admit it, he was falling in love with the feisty princess. She drove him crazy most of the time, but under her tough, assertive exterior, he could tell she had a kind

heart, a gentle soul and a sensitive nature. And so he stayed here, in this barren wasteland of ice and cold, and did what he could to help the Rebel cause.

At the moment, that meant searching the vicinity for any sign of Imperial infiltration. They had been on the icy world for weeks now, and there had been no sign that the Empire had come close to finding them. Han, however, knew that it was only a matter of time before they did. Even without Darth Vader, they had tremendous resources, and would stop at nothing until they found the Rebels and crushed them.

“Echo two to Echo seven, do you read me Han?”

“Loud and clear, sweetheart,” he replied, brushing snow from his comlink as he spoke into it. “What’s up?”

“I think I saw something,” Leia replied. “It could be a meteorite, but I think I should check it out.”

An uneasy feeling started growing within Han at her statement. “Where are you, Leia?”

“Uh... twenty-seven meters north of you,” she said after a moment. “Why?”

“I’m coming to check too,” he said, kicking his tauntaun into motion. “I have a bad feeling about this.”

“Don’t be silly,” Leia chided. “I can handle this myself.”

“I didn’t say you couldn’t,” argued Han. “But humor me, okay princess?”

Leia sighed, smiling at the back-handed chivalry that she had come to expect from Han Solo. “If you insist,” she said. “Hurry up, I’m freezing out here.”

“No, really?” Han quipped. “I’ll be right there.”

Han didn’t take long to reach the location where Leia was. He took out his binoculars and aimed them in the direction Leia indicated.

“Shit,” he said softly when he recognized the droid that was floating slowly amidst the snow drifts. “Looks like an Imperial probe droid, Leia.”

She nodded. “Yes, that’s what I thought too,” she said, an uneasy feeling growing within her. “Do you think it’s had a chance to transmit anything yet?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “If it has, we’re in big trouble.”

“Echo two to Echo Base,” Leia said, activating her comlink.

“Echo Base here, go ahead.”

“We’ve found something,” she said. “Scan the northeast quadrant, zone twenty three. Han and I think it could be an Imperial probe droid.”

There was silence on the other end, as the men in the base reacted to her words. “Echo two, could you repeat?”

“An Imperial probe droid,” Leia repeated tersely. “Scan it!”

“Right away!”

“We have to destroy it,” Han told her. “Before it gets a good look around.”

Leia nodded. “It may already have done that,” she said.

“Maybe,” he conceded, drawing his blaster. “But maybe not.”

He aimed in the direction of the moving droid, waited a few more seconds to give the Base a chance to scan it, and then fired. The droid exploded in a shower of metal parts.

“Let’s take a closer look,” Leia said, as she urged her beast forward.

Han followed suit as the two of them approached the place where the droid had exploded. What they saw did not give them much information, for it was just a pile of rubble at this point.

“Echo two this is Echo Base. What happened? We were scanning and then...”

“Han destroyed it,” Leia explained. “Did you get a read out?”

“We did,” the Base replied. “It was transmitting a code, not one any of us, even 3P0 recognized.”

Leia looked at Han. “Looks like the Empire knows we’re here,” she said.

Han nodded. “Let’s go,” he said. “Looks like we’re going to get some visitors mighty soon.”

Chapter 46

Chapter 46

The heat of the fire was welcoming as Padmé sat cross-legged in front of it with her son. She was comfortable now, her clothes almost dry thanks to its warmth. Padmé could not stop looking at Luke, as though trying to memorize every facet of his face. The fact that he had his father's eyes made Padmé's resolve to put Anakin out of her mind impossible.

"Surprised I am to see you," Yoda told Padmé as he handed her a steaming cup of cider.

"Thank you," Padmé said as she took the cup. 'I needed to see my son,' she told Yoda, smiling at Luke. "What is so surprising about that?"

"You're upset with Father," Luke stated, sensing his mother's confusion.

Padmé sighed. It was clear that Luke idolized his father, and she was not about to tarnish his image of Anakin. "I'm hurt, Luke," she replied. "Disillusioned, shocked... It's hard to reconcile the man I married with the monster he became."

"Perhaps remembering that it was in the past is the key," Yoda suggested gently. "Redeemed he is, is he not?"

"I don't know," Padmé replied. 'I'm utterly confused by what I know now.' She looked at Luke. "And yet you and your sister have total faith in him, don't you?"

Luke nodded. "It was a shock for us too at first," he admitted. "Obi-Wan told me that Darth Vader had murdered my father. So learning that he *was* my father... you can imagine how hard that was to hear."

Padmé nodded. "I'm sure it must have been devastating," she replied quietly, staring down at the hot cider in her cup. "I know what that feels like."

"Did he tell you what happened on the Death Star?" Luke asked.

"He told me that he helped Leia escape," Padmé replied.

"He did a lot more than that," Luke told her. "He sabotaged the primary weapons array, preventing the destruction of Alderaan. He ensured that all of us were able to leave the Death Star safely and even pointed out the station's weakness to the Alliance to help us destroy it. I fought in that battle, Mother. I could hear my father's voice in my head, and it was the voice of my *real* father, not Darth Vader. He was guiding me, encouraging me, and I know without his encouragement I never would have survived that battle."

Padmé listened to her son's narrative, amazed by his description of a man she had written off as being nothing but a monster. "But... Darth Vader murdered hundreds, thousands!" she replied. "How can he be the man you just described if he did all that?"

"The Dark Side, relentless it is," Yoda remarked at this point. "Like madness it is, once it has taken control. Seeing his children has released its hold on Vader. Their love for him has

redeemed him.”

“And his love for us,” Luke put in. “He knew that he was risking execution by helping Leia and me escape, but he didn’t hesitate to do so. Doesn’t that sound like the actions of a redeemed man? A man who merits a second chance?”

“Perhaps,” Padmé replied. “I suppose I’m just numbed by the whole thing, Luke. What happened on that day you and Leia were born was what caused me to lose my memory. It was the reason the three of us have been apart all these years. That isn’t an easy thing to get over.”

“Of course not,” Luke concurred. “And I’m not saying I was able to accept the truth over night. But in time I did; perhaps in time you will as well. You love him, don’t you?”

“Yes,” Padmé replied without hesitation. “This wouldn’t be so difficult if I didn’t.”

“Then give yourself time,” Luke advised. “Don’t be so sure that you will never be able to accept him.”

Padmé regarded her son for a moment before she replied. “How did you get so wise?” she asked him with a smile.

Luke shrugged a sheepish smile on his face. “I don’t know,” he said. “Maybe all this Jedi stuff is starting to wear off on me.”

Padmé couldn’t help but laugh at his comment. She leaned over and hugged him tight. “I’m so glad I came here,” she told him.

Luke hugged her back. “So am I,” he told her. “I’ve waited a lifetime to meet you, Mom.”

Sixth Planet of the Hoth System

The Rebel Base was a flurry of activity as they prepared to evacuate the ice planet. It seemed that they had just started to become accustomed to the cold when they were forced to move yet again. But at least this time they had some advanced warning. Of course, with the Empire anything was possible.

It was universally recognized that the Empire had lost some of their edge. The Rebel leaders refused to believe that Vader had not returned to the Empire, despite the fact that he had so blatantly turned against them in aiding the Rebels destroy the Death Star. None of them could conceive of the notion that he was able to be redeemed, that he was anything more than a monster.

It had been difficult for Leia to listen to the way her allies spoke about her father. It had been difficult not to defend him as she so ardently wanted to; but she realized that it would raise too many questions, and that was the last thing she needed. Obi-Wan had managed to conveniently alter General Dodonna’s knowledge of Vader’s true identity, which had made life a lot easier for Leia, particularly since she had taken her birth name as her own.

“Anything to report?” General Reikan asked as he entered the command center.

Leia looked up from the screen she was studying. “No sign yet, General,” she said. “We have been monitoring around the clock.”

Reikan nodded. "With all the meteor activity in this system it's going to be difficult to detect them until they're right on top of us," he grumbled.

"Yes, I know," Leia replied, not taking her eyes from the screen. "But the shield is in place, we'll have time to get off the planet before they can reach us."

"Let's hope so," Reikan replied.

Star Destroyer Executor

"Piett, what the hell is going on?"

Piett turned to see Darth Ferreus storming onto the bridge.

"We are en route to the Hoth System, my lord," Piett replied. "We are following a lead."

"A lead?" Ferreus asked. "You mean... the Rebels?"

"Yes sir," Piett replied patiently. "A report from a probe droid as well as several transmissions..."

"And why wasn't I informed??" Ferreus demanded angrily. "I am the commander of this vessel, Piett, or have you forgotten that?"

"No, I have not forgotten sir," Piett replied, doing his best to keep his temper in check. "Everything has just happened so quickly, that there was simply no time to fill you in, sir. And I rather had the impression that you were... busy."

Ferreus looked at Piett, trying to determine if he was being sarcastic. He decided that he was not. "And so?" he asked. "When do we arrive? How soon until we crush the rebel bastards?"

"Very soon, my lord," Piett replied, gratified that he was able to placate the irrational Ferreus. "We are preparing to make the reversion to sub light at any moment."

"Good," Ferreus replied. He did not want to admit that he was at a loss to know what to do next.

"General Veers is preparing a surface attack," Piett said, realizing that Ferreus was totally clueless. "Squadrons of clones as well as two dozen ATAT's are ready to land as soon as we reach the planet."

"Good," Ferreus said, pleased with Piett's efficiency. "Inform me when we reach the planet."

"Of course sir," Piett replied. He watched as Ferreus left the bridge, breathing a sigh of relief as he did so. The last thing he needed was the incompetent fool underfoot when there was serious business to attend to.

Ferreus wasted little time in making contact with the emperor to inform him of the latest developments.

"I assume you have good news more me, Ferreus," Palpatine intoned, his huge image towering over Ferreus' kneeling form.

“Yes, my master,” Ferreus said. ‘I have good news,’ he said. “We are about to arrive at the Hoth System. The rebel base will be crushed, my master. We have them.”

Palpatine’s eyebrows lifted in surprise. “Indeed?” he replied, making a mental note to determine the officer who would receive a commendation for finding them, as obviously Ferreus was incapable of such intelligence. “Well done, Lord Ferreus, very well done indeed.”

Ferreus smiled, pleased that his master was so happy with his, or rather Piett’s work.

“I want the Skywalker twins,” Palpatine continued. ‘Be sure that they are not harmed in the attack on the base. If you fail, you know what fate awaits you. But should you succeed,’ Palpatine stopped, trying to determine the most efficacious way to motivate the shallow young man before him. He smirked when he realized what it was. “If you succeed, you may have the Skywalker girl as your prize.”

Ferreus’ eyes widened. “The daughter of Skywalker?” he asked.

Palpatine nodded. “Yes, but only if you bring them both to me. I want them both, do you understand? The boy and the girl, or else the deal is off.”

“I understand, my master,” Ferreus replied. “I will not fail you.”

“See to it that you don’t,” Palpatine replied and then his image faded from view.

Ferreus stood up, the image of Princess Leia jumping to his mind. He smiled at the thought of having her as his own, of rubbing it in Skywalker’s face that his precious girl had been given to him as a prize by his master and used like so much common trash. With this thought in mind, he returned to the bridge to check on the progress of the impending attack.

Chapter 47

Chapter 47

Naboo Lake Retreat

The rain finally let up after keeping Anakin a virtual prisoner for two days. It was with mixed feelings that he left the retreat; the many wonderful times he'd shared there with Padmé had always made this a magical place for him. But now—the last memory of his wife was the pain and disillusionment in her eyes.

You stole my children from me! You stole twenty years of my life from me! Twenty years that I will never get back!

Her words still echoed in his mind, her accusations still stung. Yet despite her anger, he knew that Padmé still loved him. The manner in which she had so unabashedly seduced him proved it. She loved him and she wanted him. Anakin could only hope that this would be enough to enable her to forgive him in time.

Theed was busy, as always, when Anakin finally reached it. He stopped at a local market and bought some provisions. Knowing Yoda, he realized that it had probably been a long time since Luke had enjoyed some good food. *And if he's anything like me he'll be ready to eat a Bantha by now*, he reflected with a smile.

The thought of seeing his son excited Anakin, and helped alleviate some of the melancholy he found himself mired in. It had been many years since he had found himself in the part of the galaxy where Dagobah was located, but he remembered it well. Many a battle had been fought in this quadrant during the Clone Wars.

There it is... Dagobah, Anakin thought as he dropped out of hyperspace. He brought his mind into oneness with the Force to determine where he would find his son, sensing first Yoda's distinctive signature, and then Luke's luminous presence on the planet below. He smiled, sensing that Luke had grown stronger since he had seen him last. *He will make a great Jedi*, he thought proudly. *As will Leia...* He wished that he could see her as well, but realized that now was not the time. It was his hope that the Alliance would accept him at some point. And then he could join his children in their crusade against the Empire that he had helped create. *With the three of us working together, Sidious doesn't stand a chance.*

Starting his descent to the planet surface, Anakin was struck by another familiar presence in the vicinity. This was not a Force aura that he sensed, but he recognized it nonetheless. It was his wife.

Surprised that she had been adventurous enough to come all this way, Anakin realized that she would be less than happy to see him at this point. After all, they had not parted on the most cordial of terms; no doubt she was still angry, and perhaps would even think he had followed her here. *And convincing her otherwise will not be easy...*

Night had fallen upon the northern hemisphere of the small planet as Anakin landed his craft on the marshy surface. The lights from his vessel illuminated the vicinity enough for him to make out two other vessels nearby, as well as a makeshift camp site erected on one of the drier parts of the terrain. *Luke*, he realized, sensing his boy's presence close by. *But where is his mother?*

Anakin made his way through the quagmire and approached the camp site, treading carefully over the variable terrain. As he drew closer to the canvas tent where he assumed his son was sleeping, he sensed movement within, and the flap was opened to reveal Luke standing there, blaster in hand.

"Who is it?" he asked, his eyes trying to make out the form that was approaching him in the dark.

"It's me, Luke," Anakin said. "It's your father."

"Father?" Luke said, lowering his weapon at once. "What are you doing here?"

Anakin reached his son and put a hand on his shoulder. "Does a father need a reason to see his boy?" he asked with a smile. "I missed you, is that a good enough reason?"

Luke smiled. "Sure is," he said. "I missed you too. Come on in."

Anakin bent down to enter the tent as Luke turned on his lamp.

"Your mother is here, isn't she?" Anakin asked as he sat down.

Luke nodded as he joined his father. "Yeah, she got here yesterday," he said. "It was amazing to finally meet her," he added with a smile.

"I'm sure it must have been, for both of you," Anakin replied. "I'm not so sure she'll be too happy to see me, though."

"She's pretty upset," Luke replied. "But surely you expected she would be."

"Yes, I didn't expect any less," Anakin admitted. "I only hope that in time she will forgive me. I'm miserable without her, Luke."

"She's miserable without you," Luke told him. "Yes, she's angry, but it's so obvious how much she loves you, Dad. She'll come around, just give her some time."

Anakin nodded. "Yes, that was my plan," he said. "I had no idea she'd come here, otherwise I'd not have come right now. She'll probably think I followed her here."

Luke smiled. "Didn't you?" he asked.

"No, I didn't," Anakin replied. "I swear it! I sensed her presence only when I reached the planet, but by then I wasn't about to turn back."

"Don't worry, Dad," Luke said. "It will be okay."

Anakin sighed, rubbing his bristly chin with one hand. "I hope you're right, Luke," he said. He looked around the small tent. "Well, maybe we ought to try to get some sleep," he said. "If I know Master Yoda, he's working you pretty hard."

"You might say so," Luke replied with a smile.

Anakin laughed. "Oh, before I forget," he said, reaching for his duffle bag. "I thought you might be hungry," he said, opening the bag and pulling out a package. He handed it to Luke.

"Hungry?" Luke said, taking the package. "Have you seen the stuff that Yoda calls food??"

Anakin laughed again. "Yes, I have," he said. "That's why I brought you some real food."

Luke unwrapped the package, nearly salivating upon seeing its contents. He looked up at his father. "You're the best," he said with a smile.

Anakin smiled. "Thanks," he said with a yawn as he tried to make himself comfortable on the hard ground.

Luke helped himself to the snack, devouring much of it in short order as his father drifted off to sleep.

Star Destroyer Executor

Piett stood on the bridge waiting to give the command that would bring the Imperial fleet out of light speed. He knew that were they to revert back to sub light too close to the system, the Rebels would be alerted to their presence. The element of surprise must be maintained if the attack were to be effective; the Rebels were simply too slippery. *I cannot let them get away*, Piett thought to himself. *Not if I value my life.*

"Distance to the Hoth System," Piett asked.

"Point two parsecs, sir," Captain Reyal replied. "Shall I alert General Veers?"

Piett nodded. "Yes," he said. "Tell him to ready his men and be prepared to go to the surface within the next thirty minutes."

"Acknowledged sir," Reyal replied.

"Report!"

Piett and Reyal turned to see their commander entering the bridge.

"We are about to enter the Hoth System, my lord," Piett replied. "Preparing to make the reversion to sub light speed."

"Well, what's the delay?" Ferreus asked impatiently.

"My lord, if we enter the system too soon, they will detect us," Piett explained patiently, starting to feel as though he were talking to a child. *A spoiled rotten, psychotic child...* "The element of surprise will be ours if we are patient just a little while longer."

"Just be sure you don't mess this up, Piett," Ferreus replied threateningly. "I would hate to report your incompetence to the Emperor."

Piett had to bite back his response, and merely nodded at the vile man before him. He turned back to Reyal lest his face betray the anger and revulsion he was feeling at that moment. "Distance, Reyal," he said.

"Optimum distance, sir," Reyal replied.

Piett nodded. "Commence reversion at once," he said. 'And raise our shields.' He turned back to Ferreus. "We've arrived, sir."

Sixth Planet of the Hoth System

"All troop carriers will assemble at the north entrance," Leia briefed the group of pilots in the center of the hangar. "The heavy transport ships will leave as soon as they're loaded. Only two fighter escorts per ship. The energy shield can only be opened for a short time, so you'll have to stay very close to your transports."

"Two fighters against a Star Destroyer?" one pilot asked incredulously.

"The ion cannon will fire several shots to make sure that any enemy ships will be out of your flight path," Leia explained. "When you've gotten past the energy shield, proceed directly to the rendezvous point. Understood?"

The pilots nodded, and responded in the affirmative.

"Good luck," Leia told them, and then watched them dash off to their ships. *We need you, Luke*, she thought, wishing desperately that her brother was there to help the Alliance with this fight. *Now more than ever.*

Obi-Wan approached Leia, a grave expression on his face.

"What's wrong now?" she asked.

"Imperial ships have been spotted in the system," he told her.

Leia nodded her understanding. "Well, we knew they were coming," she said. "Let's just hope we can get the transports away before they get close enough to blast them out of the stars."

"Yes, let us hope so," Obi-Wan said. 'I see that I have been assigned to one of the first transports,' he said. "Why is that do you suppose?" he asked, looking at her pointedly.

Leia shrugged. "I don't know," she replied. "Perhaps they felt the most important people ought to leave first."

Obi-Wan nodded. "So why aren't you on that same transport?" he asked.

"I am coordinating the evacuation," she explained.

"The fact that I am...seasoned has nothing to do with it?" Obi-Wan asked.

Leia laughed. "Seasoned? Now there's a euphemism. No, Obi-Wan, the fact that you are older than many of us has nothing to do with it. You are one of the last Jedi left in the galaxy. I think that makes you rather important, don't you?"

"Maybe so," Obi-Wan replied. "But what sort of a master would I be if I left my padawan behind at such a time? I will not do it, Leia. I will stay and leave when you leave."

"But..."

"Don't even try to argue with me, Ana... I mean Leia," he replied. "You remind me so much of your father sometimes," he added, shaking his head.

Leia smiled, missing her father tremendously. "I'll take that as a compliment," she said. 'Come with me,' she said. "I need to get to the command base."

"As you wish, milady," Obi-Wan replied.

Chapter 48

Chapter 48

Anakin awoke the next morning to find that his son was gone. He sat up and stretched his arms above his head. Standing up next, he looked outside the tent and saw Luke in conversation with Yoda.

“Good morning,” Anakin said.

“Good morning Dad,” Luke replied with a smile. “How did you sleep?”

“Not bad,” he replied. He looked at Yoda. ‘Master Yoda,’ he said, nodding in his direction. “It is good to see you.”

“Anakin Skywalker,” Yoda said. “Sensed your approach, I did. Good to see you it is.”

“A lot has happened since we last saw one another, Master Yoda,” Anakin said. “A lot that I need to atone for.”

Yoda nodded. “A good start you have made,” he said. “Young Luke has told me about what happened on the Death Star.”

“I wasn’t going to let Tarkin harm my daughter,” Anakin replied. “No matter what the cost. Meeting her and then Luke made me realize all that I had lost, all that the Dark Side had stolen from me.”

“Destroy the Sith you must,” Yoda told him. “Part of the prophecy of the Chosen One it is. No doubts have I now that the Chosen One you are. Only the Chosen One could return from the Dark Side.”

“Sidious will pay for what he has done,” Anakin averred. “I promise you that.”

Yoda regarded Anakin carefully. “Revenge is not the way of the Jedi,” he warned him. “That is the way of Darkness, of the Sith. Be certain your motives are not founded in Darkness, Anakin, or lost in it you will be once again.”

“That will never happen,” Luke spoke up, Yoda’s words unnerving him. “Will it Father?”

“I will not let the Dark Side take me from my family again, Luke,” Anakin assured his son. “I promise you that.”

Yoda nodded. “Glad I am to hear this,” he said. “Strong is the emperor. Strong you must be to destroy him, Anakin. Strong with no trace of Darkness within your soul.”

“I have rejected the Dark Side, Master Yoda,” Anakin told him. “I will never allow it to dominate me again. I have a lot to make up for, and I realize that. The past twenty years of my life have been spent in utter darkness, committing acts of unspeakable evil. If it takes me the rest of my life, I will atone for those years, I swear it.”

“Convinced us you have, Anakin,” Yoda commented. “You sound as though perhaps you are trying to convince yourself.”

“No, it is not me who needs to be convinced,” Anakin replied.

Yoda nodded. “Your wife,” he said. “She has remembered the past and is reliving the pain all over again.”

“Pain caused by me,” Anakin added. “I’m not sure she will ever be able to get past it. Look at what it did to her the first time.”

“She will,” Luke said. “I’m sure of it. Just give her time.”

“Anakin! What are you doing here??”

The three looked over to see Padmé approaching them. She was looking directly at Anakin, her dark eyes full of indignation and anger.

“Perhaps the two of you could give us a moment alone,” Anakin asked of his son.

Luke nodded, looking back at his mother, wishing he knew what to say to make things right between his parents again.

Padmé waited until Luke and Yoda had left before she turned back to Anakin.

“Did you follow me here?” she asked.

“No, of course not,” Anakin replied. “I wanted to see Luke. He’s my son too, Padmé.”

“That is hardly the point right now,” she said.

“Isn’t it?” Anakin replied. “Perhaps we ought to put our own differences aside and focus on our children and their needs,” he suggested.

“Why do you think I came here?” she replied.

“To get away from me?” he asked, attempting to lighten the mood.

“You think this is funny?” Padmé replied, her anger rising.

“No, of course not,” Anakin replied, becoming exasperated. “There’s nothing funny about any of this.”

“At least we agree on one thing,” she said.

“I think we agree on many things, actually,” he said. The unpleasantness of her anger was tempered with the fact that she was back; he was witnessing his wife in old form, full of spirit and willing to argue a point to the bitter end. If the situation weren’t so dire, he might have actually enjoyed himself.

“You think so, do you?” she asked, folding her arms over her chest.

Anakin simply nodded.

“Such as?”

“Well, we both love our children,” he began.

“Yes, that is true,” she conceded.

“We love each other,” he said, almost dreading her reaction.

Padmé was silent for a moment as she considered his statement. She could not deny that she loved him; even if she did, he would know that she was lying. Love was not the issue though; trust and loyalty were, and once those things were gone, love could do very little.

“I won’t deny that,” she said at last. “But sometimes love isn’t enough. You told me so yourself, remember?”

“I told you that when I was insane, Padmé,” he replied. “Don’t you understand that? The darkness within me turned me into a madman, an irrational beast. Why else would I have turned on you the way I did? Everything I did was to save you! As foolish as that seems in light of everything that happened afterwards, it was my motivation for everything I did, no matter how misguided that may be. I’m not sure you will ever be able to forgive me for that, but that is the truth.”

Padmé turned away from him, unable to look at the expression of hurt in his eyes any longer. “I want to forgive you,” she admitted quietly. “I want things to be the way they were between us, Anakin. The other night was so wonderful; it brought back so many memories of the times we’d shared together, of the way things used to be between us. I want that back more than anything.”

“We can have that back, Padmé!” Anakin said, turning her gently towards him again. “Don’t you see? I know you are angry, with good reason; but can’t you at least consider that I’ve changed? I’m not the monster who attacked you on Mustafar; I’m not the monster who has terrorized the galaxy for the past two decades. I’ve rejected the Dark Side, and I want nothing more now than to make up for all that I’ve done. But in order for me to do that, I need forgiveness. I need it from my children; I need it from myself, from the galaxy... and you, because without your forgiveness, I am empty inside. I am only whole when you love me, Padmé.”

His words moved her, for she could see how sincere he was. But yet, part of her was afraid to allow herself to be won over by them. She was hurting, and her defense mechanisms were still doing their utmost to shield her from more hurt.

“I will leave if you want me to,” he said at last, seeing that his words had not seemed to have any affect on her. “I don’t want you to be uncomfortable, and I can sense that you are.”

“It wouldn’t be fair to Luke if you left now,” she replied. “You’re right; we have to think about our children.”

Anakin nodded, trying not to read too much into her attitude. “Thank you,” he said at last. He hated the formality that had suddenly sprung up between them. Mere days ago he had been teasing her, joking with her, and she had been completely at ease with him. And now the tension was unbearable.

“Good morning, Mother,” Luke said as he rejoined his parents. “Yoda has asked me if the two of you would like some breakfast.”

“Sounds great,” Anakin said, relieved that Luke had arrived in time to break the tension. “Coming Padmé?” he asked his wife.

Padmé nodded. “Yes, I’m coming.”

Sixth Planet of the Hoth System

Echo Base was a hive of activity as the Rebel forces desperately tried to evacuate before the impending Imperial juggernaut. Several transports had managed to lift off before the Imperial armada was close enough to stop them; however it wasn’t long before they had set up a blockade around the icy planet, making the Rebels’ escape attempts difficult and dangerous.

In addition to the blockade above the planet surface, a squadron of heavily armed clones equipped for combat in extremely cold conditions, had landed on the surface, as well as the dreaded Imperial walkers. At least two dozen of these armored behemoths bore down upon the Rebel base. Their objective: the shield generator.

Rebel pilots swarmed over the battle field, waving in and out among the herd of walkers, inflicting as much damage as their weapons could manage. On the ground, the Rebel infantry did their utmost to prevent the Imperials from reaching their objective. It wasn’t too long before it became apparent that there would be no stopping them, and the mission simply became one of buying time for the members of the Alliance still within the base. Many soldiers did so with their lives, knowing that every second counted if lives were to be saved.

Han Solo was not a man who panicked easily, but the rumbling of the walkers outside, the constant sound of cave ins and the alarm klaxons over head were just about enough to do the trick. It wasn’t that he hadn’t been in his own share of dangerous situations; quite the contrary. Normally he thrived in such condition. But normally he was only trying to save his own skin; this time there was someone else’s life that mattered more to him than he was willing to admit.

Reaching the command center, he stepped over a fallen piece of equipment to reach the people inside. There were only two: Leia and the communications officer.

“Are you alright?” he asked her.

Leia looked up at him, the fear evident in her eyes, despite her best efforts to hide it. “Why aren’t you on the transport with Obi-Wan?”

“What? And leave the Falcon behind?” he asked. “Never mind me, what are you still doing here?”

“Someone has to coordinate the battle,” she told him. “Get out of here while you can!”

“Not before I see you onto that last transport,” he replied.

Leia looked up at him, appreciative that he had thought of her rather than saving his own life first. She was about to reply when a dire announcement was heard over the loud speakers.

“Imperial troops have entered the base! Imperial troops have entered the base!”

“Come on, that’s it,” Han said. “There’s no more time, Leia.”

Leia nodded, and turned back to the communication officer. “Give the evacuation code signal,” she ordered him. “And get to your transport!”

Leia joined Han and the two of them headed out of the command center, dodging falling debris as they went.

"How did you manage to convince Obi-Wan to go to the transport without you?" Han asked.

"I told him I forgot something in my quarters," she said.

"And he believed you?"

Leia shrugged. "I guess I'm getting better at shielding my thoughts from him," she replied with a smile.

"Yeah, I guess so," he responded. "Watch out!"

Leia screamed as the ceiling gave way, blocking their path completely.

"You okay?" Han asked as he helped her to her feet.

Leia nodded, brushing snow and dust from her pants.

Han looked grimly at the obstruction, and then activated his comlink. "Transport, this is Solo," he said. "You'd better take off, I can't get to you. I'll get her out on the transport."

Han and Leia turned back the way they came, racing in the direction of the hangar where the Falcon was. As they got there, Chewbacca greeted them with an angry growl.

"We're coming!" Han shouted back as he and Leia ran to the ramp of the freighter.

"Captain Solo!" See-Threepio cried as they boarded the vessel. "Where have you been? We have been waiting...."

"Shut up Goldenrod," Han retorted. "And strap yourself in. We're taking off right away."

"But sir!"

"This bucket of bolts is never going to get us past that blockade!" Leia said as Han furiously activated switches in an attempt to start the recalcitrant freighter.

"This baby's got a few surprises left in her sweetheart," he muttered. Through the view screen they saw a small group of clones burst into the room, lead by a tall figure dressed in black robes.

"Chewie!" Han said, not even needing to give the order. The Falcon's main gun exploded in a spray of laser fire, leveling the clones before they had a chance to set up their artillery weapons.

"Punch it!" Han said and the Falcon took off, leaving the remaining clones and their leader behind.

"I don't know who that was," Han told Chewie. "But it looks to me like the emperor has a new henchman."

Leia nodded. "A Sith," she said, having felt the darkness of the black robed figure from across the hangar. "My father's replacement, no doubt."

"Great," Han said. "Just what we need, another Vader."

Leia did not reply, and simply sat back and let Han and Chewie do their best to evade the Imperial blockade that was rapidly approaching.

Chapter 49

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Star Destroyer Executor

Ferreus returned to the *Executor*, angry and frustrated that the Skywalker twins had evaded him. *But at least I know where one of them is*, he reasoned as he headed for the bridge. *That freighter is the key, I can't let them escape.*

"Follow that freighter," Ferreus ordered as he entered the bridge. "Under no circumstances are they to get away."

"My lord, we managed to destroy eight of the..."
"I don't care," Ferreus retorted hotly. "The rest of the rebels don't matter to me right now. I want the children of Skywalker at any cost. One of them is on board that freighter."

"Don't worry sir," Piett assured him. "We won't let them get away."

"Make sure you don't," Ferreus warned.

Piett did not reply, but merely watched as Ferreus left the bridge with a furl of his black cloak. He then turned back to the crew who awaited his orders.

"Track that freighter," he said. "Do not let them out of your sight. When they are in range, engage the tractor beam."

"Yes sir," Reyal replied. He looked up at Piett who stood beside his station. "Does he mean *Anakin Skywalker*?"

Piett nodded. "Yes he does," he replied. Piett could not help but think that there was a connection between Skywalker and Darth Vader, for it seemed that the two men had never coexisted. What was more, the emperor's sudden interest in the children of Anakin Skywalker coincided with the defection and subsequent disappearance of Darth Vader. Coincidence? Piett thought it highly unlikely. But his opinions were irrelevant; he had a job to do. Firmus Piett was a man of honor; so he would follow his orders to capture the Skywalker offspring, and do his best to ignore the protests of his conscience.

Planet Dagobah

"This is delicious, Master Yoda," Padmé said as she sat beside Luke. "Thank you."

"How is Leia?" Luke asked his parents.

"She's missing you," Anakin told him as he took a spot on the floor beside Yoda. "But other than that, she's fine. Giving Obi-Wan a challenge, I'm sure," he added with a smile.

Luke laughed. "He had his hands full with the two of us," he replied. "I think he was thrilled to see me leave."

"A patient teacher, Obi-Wan is," Yoda put in.

“He had to be, with me as his padawan,” Anakin said with a smile.

“Oh come on,” Luke said. “From what he told us you were a model apprentice.”

Anakin’s eyes widened. “Model apprentice?” he repeated. “I think someone has been pulling your leg, Luke,” he said.

Luke laughed. “Well, maybe model isn’t quite the word he used,” he said. “But he always speaks highly of you.”

“We were very close at one time,” Anakin replied. “Like brothers.”

Yoda nodded. “You were,” he agreed. “Until the Dark Side infected that bond. The emperor, a master of manipulation he is. Blind we all were to his plot to destroy you, Anakin, to destroy the Jedi.”

Anakin nodded. “I was blind too,” he said. “Too blind with my own fear and insecurities to see what he was doing until it was too late.’ He looked down into the fire. “I allowed him to use me, Master Yoda. I was so obsessed with saving Padmé that I didn’t even consider that he was using me. I was a fool, a stupid, short-sighted fool.”

“You were trying to save the woman you loved,” Luke reminded his father. “There is nothing stupid about that, Dad.”

Anakin looked up at his son, and then over at Padmé who had been silent during the entire conversation. “No, perhaps my motivations were not,” he said. “But in the end, those motives were lost amidst the horrible acts I committed.”

“Such is the way of the Dark Side,” Yoda put in. “It twists even the best of intentions, blackens the noblest motives.”

“If there is anything remotely positive that has come out of all this, it has been that my mistakes will serve as an example to my children,” Anakin said at last. ‘Knowing what befell me will enable them to avoid the same mistakes I made.’ He looked at Padmé. “I only regret that the cost of this has been so high,” he added.

Padmé could see the pain and regret in his eyes and part of her felt badly for him. Yes, Palpatine had used him; he had probably plotted to destroy him from the moment he first met Anakin as a boy. But he made the decision to believe the monstrous Sith Lord of his own free will, hadn’t he? He had slaughtered the younglings of his own free will; he had nearly killed his wife of his own free will. Palpatine may have leaded him to the Dark Side, but once there, Anakin had embraced it fully.

“We have all paid the price, Anakin,” Yoda said. “But none more than you. The fact that you have managed to free yourself from the grasp of the Dark Side is a testament to your strength of character, and affirms the belief that you are the Chosen One. It is the will of the Force that has brought you and your children together, Anakin. They have been instrumental in your redemption.”

Anakin looked at his son with a smile. “I couldn’t agree more,” he said.

“What do you say to some saber practice, Dad?”

"Sounds like a great idea," Anakin replied. "That is if you think you can keep up with your old man," he added with a smile.

Luke laughed. "Well, for one thing, you're not old," he began. "And secondly, I'd befooling myself to think that I could keep up with you. Not yet, at least," he added with a smile.

Anakin lifted his eyebrows. "I see," he said. "What do you think, Master Yoda? Is the boy ready?"

Yoda nodded. "Eager he is to try his skills," he commented. "Humbled he may be against a much stronger opponent," he added, looking at Luke.

"Nothing wrong with a good humbling once in a while," Anakin remarked. "It keeps us from getting too complacent."

"Indeed," Yoda commented. "Pride can be destructive. Arrogance is the way of Darkness. A Jedi must know humility if he is to be pure of heart."

"I couldn't agree more," Anakin replied, standing up. He looked down at his wife. "Are you coming?" he asked her.

"You're not going to hurt him, are you?" she asked.

"I'll try to go easy on him, I promise," he said, holding a hand to her to help her up.

"There is no try, Dad," Luke reminded him with a grin as Yoda took the dishes into the next room. "Don't you know that?"

Anakin laughed. "How could I forget?" He put an arm around his son's shoulders. "Has he given you the *size matters not* speech yet?" he asked him quietly.

"Yeah, got that one yesterday," Luke replied.

Anakin laughed. "Some things never change."

Padmé watched the exchange between her husband and their son, loving the way they interacted, loving how close they had already grown. Luke obviously had managed to get past the ugliness of Anakin's past and had accepted him fully as his father. *Surely if he can do that, I can do it too*, Padmé thought as she followed them out of the small hut. *But Luke never had to see the look of murder in his father's eyes, never had to feel his rage unleashed upon him; perhaps if he had, his forgiveness would not come so easily.*

Millennium Falcon-Hoth System

Having evaded three star destroyers, nearly causing the three enormous vessels to collide, Han was making the final calculations to make the jump to hyperspace. It would not be too soon for Leia, who could almost feel the clone troopers breathing down her neck.

"They're getting closer," she told Han, trying to keep her fear out of her voice.

Han, however, was nonplussed. "Oh yeah?" he replied in his patently cocky manner. "Watch this!" he added, activating the hyper drive controls with a grand gesture. To his horror, however, nothing happened.

“Watch what!?” Leia retorted hotly.

A cold sense of fear began to spread through Han. “I think we’re in trouble,” he muttered, his eyes wide as he surveyed the control panel frantically.

“Sir, I noticed earlier the hyper drive motivator has been damaged,” See Threepio cried. “It’s impossible to go to light speed!”

“We’re in trouble!” Han replied, jumping to his feet and heading for the access panel in the hold

Leia simply sat in the chair he had just vacated, trying to remain calm in the light of their latest set back. *Peace, be calm*, she told herself, using the Force to keep herself calm. But with each parsec the traveled, the Imperial ships gained on them a little more. Before long she knew that they would engage their tractor beam, and then it would all be over.

“What the...” she said, peering out the view screen. When she realized what it was that she had seen, she activated the comm. at once. “Han, get up here!” she called.

Within moment Han and Chewbacca returned to the cockpit.

“Asteroids!” Leia told him simply.

Han did not seem alarmed; in fact, it was almost as though he was happy to hear it. “Chewie set two-seven to one.”

Leia could not believe what she was hearing. “What are you doing?” she demanded. “You’re not actually going *into* an asteroid field?”

“They’d be crazy to follow us, wouldn’t they?” Han replied.

Leia sat down, stunned by his recklessness. “You *are* crazy, aren’t you?” she asked

Han shrugged. “Maybe so,” he said. “Maybe you could use some of your Jedi powers and help us out of this jam, sweetheart. We’re kind of out of options here.”

Leia looked at him. Han didn’t believe in the Force, did he? So why was he willing to place their fate in the hands of something he had no faith existed. “Are you serious?”

“Yeah, sit down,” he said. “Gimme a hand.”

Leia wasn’t sure she wanted to shoulder such a huge responsibility, but there was no time to vacillate. She sat down at the controls and closed her eyes for a moment, focusing her mind on the Force. She opened her eyes and watched the asteroids as they hurtled towards the *Falcon*. The Force enabled her to see them as though they were moving in slow motion, enabling her to steer the *Falcon* around them easily as Han manned the main gun to blast the TIE fighters that were in pursuit. Leia felt as though the controls were an extension of her, the freighter responded to her slightest movement.

“Look,” Han said simply.

Leia nodded and brought the *Falcon* closer to an enormous asteroid. *This feels wrong*, she thought.

“No, not here,” she said.

“We have no choice, sweetheart,” Han said. “Do it!”

Leia complied and flew the ship into an enormous cavern within an asteroid. Two TIE fighters tried to follow them through the narrow passageway, only to crash and explode upon the walls of the corridor.

“Beautiful,” Han said, utterly impressed by Leia’s piloting. “I have to say, that was damn impressive.”

Leia smiled at him. “Now do you believe in the Force?” she asked.

Han stood up. “Kinda hard to argue with that performance,” he replied. “Now how are you at fixing hyperdrive motivators?” he asked with a grin.

Leia laughed. “I think you need my father, not me,” she said. “But I’ll do my best to help.”

“That’s good enough for me,” Han said. “Come on.”

Chapter 50

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"Are you sure this is such a good idea?" Padmé asked Anakin as they followed Luke and Yoda outside. "He's just a padawan learner, and you're an expert. That hardly seems fair."

"What better way for him to learn?" Anakin asked. "Besides, there aren't a lot of other opponents for him to spar with. It's an important part of his training, Padmé."

"I don't like the idea," she replied sullenly. "It just doesn't seem right."

Anakin smiled at her over-protectiveness. "I won't hurt the boy, Padmé," he assured her. "I promise. I won't even try."

"This looks like a good spot," Luke said as he removed his jacket. "Ready?"

Anakin nodded as he removed his outer tunic. "Ready."

Luke removed his lightsaber from his belt and held it out in front of him. Anakin stared at it, the sight of his old lightsaber stopping him cold. "I haven't seen that in many years," he said, as memories of Mustafar jumped to his mind.

"Obi-Wan gave it to me," Luke replied. "He told me you'd want me to have it."

Anakin nodded, only half listening. ***You were the Chosen One! You were supposed to bring balance to the Force, not leave it in Darkness!!***

"Dad? You okay?"

Anakin tore his eyes from the lightsaber and looked at his son. "Yes," he replied. "Just... remembering. Come on then," he said, taking his own weapon into his hands. "Let's begin."

Luke activated his weapon and held it out in front of him with both hands.

Anakin followed suit, hating the sight of the red Sith blade he held. *I will need to make a new saber at the first opportunity*, he vowed.

Both Skywalkers circled, watching the other warily. Luke knew that he was well out of his league, that his father could easily best him with one hand tied behind his back. Still, he relished the chance to cross sabers with someone as legendary as his father, the Chosen One.

"Hold your weapon higher, son," Anakin instructed. "I have a big height advantage; you need to compensate for it."

Luke nodded, and lifted his weapon higher. Anakin smiled, enjoying the chance to tutor his son, something he had missed out on for Luke's entire life. Tentatively Luke attempted a thrust, stepping towards his father and bringing his blade to his. Anakin met Luke's feint with any easy maneuver, side stepping and pushing Luke back with one hand.

Padmé watched anxiously as father and son sparred, their blades crashing against one another. It was obvious that Anakin was holding back, and Padmé appreciated his

consideration for Luke's well being. There was something else that was obvious to Padmé; that Anakin was thoroughly enjoying himself. It was clear to Padmé that Anakin adored his son, and that Luke returned his father's affection. It warmed her heart to hear the encouraging words and advice Anakin gave to Luke as their mock battle raged on.

Eventually both combatants removed their inner tunics, as each of them had a fine sheen of sweat upon their torsos. Padmé tried not to look at Anakin, tried not to let her mind wander back to the night of passion they had shared recently. *He is so beautiful*, she thought, watching him move.

Anakin turned to look at his wife for a second, sensing the direction of her thoughts. He smiled when he caught her eye and then returned his attention to Luke.

Anakin was impressed by his son's skills, but could tell that Luke had reached his limits. "Had enough?" he asked him over their crossed sabers.

Luke looked up at his father, not wanting to admit defeat yet. "Have you?"

Anakin laughed. "Not a chance," he said, repelling Luke's blade and leaping over him easily. Luke spun around, surprised by his father's move and held his blade up just in time to repel Anakin's attack.

Padmé gasped as the intensity of the battle increased. Yoda could see that she was upset, and decided it was time to put a stop to the lesson.

"That is enough practice for today," he said. "Fought well, you both have."

Anakin and Luke looked at one another, and then took a step backwards. They turned off their sabers and stood for a moment trying to catch their breath.

"Very good," Anakin told his son. "You have learned a lot in a short time."

Luke smiled, buoyed by his father's praise. "Thanks," he said. "And thanks for going easy on me, I know you did."

Anakin didn't deny it, and merely smiled in response. He turned and looked at Padmé, who was watching him intently. "What do you think of our young man, Padmé?" he asked her. "Pretty impressive, isn't he?"

Padmé nodded, turning her eyes to Luke. "Yes, very much so," she replied, smiling at him. "Rather like his father," she added, looking back at Anakin.

Her words surprised Anakin, and he was unsure how to respond. He had sensed that she was starting to soften ever slightly. "Thank you," he said at last, doing his best to keep his hopes in check. He walked over to Luke and put an arm around his shoulders. 'I'm very proud of you, son,' he told Luke. "Very impressed."

"Thanks Dad," Luke replied, looking up at his father with hero worship in his eyes. "That means a lot coming from you."

Anakin was about to reply when he stopped. He sensed that something was amiss. *It's Leia*, he thought, a cold feeling of dread filling him. *She's afraid...*

"Dad? What is it?" Luke asked, sensing his father's sudden change in demeanor.

"I'm not sure," Anakin replied. "Leia is afraid... I'm not sure why, but I can feel it clearly."

Luke concentrated for a moment, and he too was able to feel his sister's fear. "I can too," he said.

"What is it?" Padmé asked, becoming alarmed. "What's wrong??"

"I don't know," Anakin replied. 'Maybe we ought to try and contact her,' he suggested. "Just to make sure she's okay."

Padmé nodded. "We can use the comm. on my ship," she said. "Follow me."

Star Destroyer Executor

"Admiral Piett, the freighter has changed its course," Captain Reyal reported. He looked up at the admiral. "They are heading straight for the asteroid field."

"Are you certain?" Piett asked, coming over to the screen to have a look for himself.

"Not a doubt, sir," Reyal replied. 'They probably think they can evade us in there, sir,' he added. "Knowing we won't follow them in there."

Piett nodded, an uneasy feeling growing within him. They had no choice but to follow them in, however; Ferreus' orders were quite explicit and left no room for interpretation. He wanted that freighter at any cost.

"Move to match their course," Piett replied at last. "We're going in."

Reyal looked at his comrade and commander with wide eyes. "Sir?"

"You heard me," Piett replied tersely. "Lord Ferreus left very clear orders that the freighter was to be captured. That means we go where they go. Contact the other destroyers and relay that order as well, Reyal. We'll force them out somehow."

"Yes, sir," Reyal replied, turning to follow his orders.

Millennium Falcon

"I'm gonna shut down everything except the emergency power systems," Han announced as he entered the cockpit. He commenced shutting off circuits, casting the cockpit into dimness.

"I'm almost afraid to ask, Sir," Threepio said fretfully. "But does that include shutting me down as well?"

"No," Han replied. "I need you to talk to the Falcon, find out what's wrong with the hyperdrive."

Just then the asteroid beneath the ship gave a lurch, and all the passengers on board had to fight to maintain their balance. Once it had stopped, Threepio announced, "Sir, it's quite possible that this asteroid is not entirely stable!"

Han looked at the droid incredulously. "Not entirely stable?" he repeated. "I'm glad you're here to tell us these things! Chewie take the professor in back and plug him into the hyperdrive!"

Threepio commenced bemoaning how irrational humans were as Chewbacca escorted him out of the cockpit. The ship gave another lurch, this one more violent than the last, and Leia was sent flying backwards onto Han's lap.

Leia's immediate reaction confused her. The proximity of his body both excited and frightened her. "Let go," she said at once.

"Shhh," he replied, as though trying to determine what was causing the shifting beneath them.

"Let go, please!" Leia implored, growing more anxious.

"Don't get excited!" Han replied irritably.

Leia felt her face grow warm with anger and indignation "Captain, being held by you isn't quite enough to get me excited," she informed him tersely.

"Sorry sweetheart," he replied, lifting her off of him easily as he stood up. "I haven't got time for anything else," he said with a grin. He could tell by the look on her face that his remark had achieved its desired effect, and so he left the cockpit, the smile still on his face.

Leia was too shocked at first to reply, and simply turned away from him to hide the redness of her face. *Damn you, Han*, she thought, punching the panel beside her in frustration. *Damn you and your cockiness!* She decided to put him out of her mind and left the cockpit to find something to do.

Han made his way back to the hold, trying to forget the scent of Leia's hair, or the way it felt having her body so close to his. It bothered him that a woman was able to get to him this way, particularly since she wasn't even trying.

"Sir, I don't know where your ship learned to communicate," Threepio told Han haughtily. "But it has a most peculiar dialect."

"Just cut to the chase, Goldenrod," Han grumbled.

"I beg your pardon, sir," the droid replied. "What chase?"

Han shook his head in disbelief at the droid's obtuseness. "Just get to the point!" he said. "If you can."

"Oh," Threepio replied. "One might have said that in the first place," he stated petulantly.

"Do you know what is wrong with the Falcon?" Han asked, becoming exasperated.

"Oh yes," Threepio replied. "The coupling on the hyperdrive motivator has been polarized. I'm afraid you'll have to replace it."

Great, Han thought. "Well of course I'll have to replace it!" he replied irritably. He walked away to an open hatchway where Chewbacca was working. "Here," he called up, handing his copilot a coil of cable.

"And Chewie, I think we'd better replace the negative power coupling."

Han smirked as he noted the way Threepio was looking at him, almost as though in indignation. He left the hold and found Leia doing some welding in small enclave off the

main corridor. Han watched her for a moment as she finished her task and then hung up her goggles. She started closing the valves, but one of them was giving her trouble. She tried and tried, putting all one hundred pounds of her weight behind her attempt, but to no avail. Han could see that she was getting frustrated and reached over her shoulders to help her.

Leia had been so busy focusing on what she was doing that she was startled by his sudden touch and pushed back against him angrily.

“Hey, your worship, I’m only trying to help!” he told her.

“Would you please stop calling me that?” she replied, still trying to finish her task.

“Sure Leia,” he replied affably.

She shook her head at his cocky attitude. “You make it so difficult sometimes,” she grumbled.

“I do, I really do,” he admitted. “But you could be a little nicer. Come on admit it, sometimes you think I’m alright.”

Leia finally gave up as her hand bore the brunt of her efforts. “Occasionally, maybe,” she conceded, shaking her hand. “When you aren’t acting like a scoundrel.”

“Scoundrel?” Han repeated, smiling as he took her injured hand in his hands.

Leia nodded, her feelings becoming confused again.

“*Scoundrel*? I like the sound of that,” he said, rubbing her hand gently.

“Stop that,” Leia protested, becoming alarmed by the way he was looking at her.

“Stop what?” he asked innocently.

“Stop that, my hands are dirty,” she replied lamely.

“My hands are dirty too, what are you afraid of?” Han replied, moving closer to her.

“Afraid?” she asked, trying to sound haughty but not quite managing. The closeness of him was confusing her and making her feel giddy, weak and terrified all at once.

“You like me because I’m a scoundrel,” he told her softly, his face mere centimeters from hers. “There aren’t enough scoundrels in your life.”

Leia managed to shake her head, her eyes locked on his. “I happen to like nice men,” she said, her voice barely audible.

“I’m nice men,” he assured her.

“No you’re not, you’re...” The rest of her sentence was lost as Han brought his mouth to hers. Leia had never felt like anything like this in her life, and she didn’t want it to stop. She reached up and wrapped her arms around his neck, giving in at last to the feeling she had been trying to deny for so long.

Leia pulled back and looked up at him, her fingers laced together behind his neck. “My father will kick your cocky Corellian butt when he finds out about this,” she told him with a smile.

“So don’t tell him,” Han replied, kissing her again.

“Sir! Sir! I’ve isolated the reverse power flux coupling!” Threepio announced excitedly as he barged in on them.

Han reluctantly pulled away from Leia and turned slowly to the oblivious droid. “Thank you,” he said slowly. “Thank you very much!”

“Oh you’re perfectly welcome, sir,” Threepio replied amiably.

Han looked back at Leia, rolling his eyes in annoyance.

“Come on,” she said, taking his arm. “We have a lot of work to do.”

Dagobah

Anakin sat down beside his wife as she activated the comm. screen. He wiped the sweat from his brow as he waited for them to make contact.

“I can’t raise anyone,” Padmé said at last after several attempts.

Anakin frowned, his anxiety increasing. “Looks like communications are offline,” he commented.

“Maybe it’s the weather,” Padmé suggested turning to him.

Anakin wasn’t convinced. “Maybe,” he said. “But I can’t shake the feeling that there’s something going on.”

Padmé could see how upset Anakin was. Clearly he loved Leia tremendously.

“What about the *Falcon*?” suggested Luke. “Its communications may be operational.”

“I’ll try,” Padmé said. She turned back to the screen and tried to raise the *Falcon* next. Again she was unable to raise anyone.

“It has to be the weather,” Luke said at last. “The storms there can be really brutal. It would not be the first time that communications have been disrupted by one.”

“We’ll try again in a few hours,” Padmé suggested. “Hopefully it will have passed by then.”

Anakin nodded. “I just hope that’s all it is,” he said.

“What else could explain both the base and the *Falcon* being unable to receive outside contact?” Luke reasoned as he stood up. “Try not to worry, Dad,” he added. “Obi-Wan won’t let anything happen to her.”

“He’d better not,” Anakin grumbled.

“Master Yoda is expecting me,” Luke said to his parents. “I’d better go.”

“See you later, Luke,” Padmé said as he kissed her cheek.

Anakin sat in silence as Luke made his way off the ship. Padmé watched her husband. “What are you thinking?” she asked him. “What do you think has happened?”

Anakin looked at her. "I don't know," he replied. "Maybe nothing. Maybe I'm just an over-protective slightly paranoid father."

Padmé smiled. "You? Over-protective? Never."

Anakin wasn't amused by her attempt at humor, and she regretted her comment immediately.

"I'm sorry," she said. "That was rather insensitive of me."

"Don't worry about it," he replied, standing up and turning to leave. "I need to go find a place to get cleaned up."

"You're welcome to use the fresher in here," she told him.

Anakin stopped and turned to her. "I don't want to trouble you," he said.

Padmé stood up to face him. "It's no trouble," she assured him.

"Then I thank you," he replied turning again to leave.

"Why did you do it?" she asked him.

Anakin stopped once again, but did not look at her. "I told you why, Padmé," he replied tiredly. "To save you."

"No, I'm not asking about why you turned to the Dark Side," she replied, walking over to him. "Why did you convince me to stop taking those meds? You knew that by stopping them I would eventually remember everything; why did you take that risk? Surely you knew how I would react."

He turned to her at last. "How can you ask me that?" he replied. "I would rather have you remember everything and be the woman I love even if it means losing you than have you remain in that hell Palo created for you. You probably don't believe me, but that's the truth."

Padmé was too taken aback by his words to reply, and could only stand and watch him walk away.

Chapter 51

Chapter 51

Star Destroyer Executor

Engineers, Piett thought irritably as he made his way back to the bridge. *Don't they realize I have more important matters to deal with right now?* He resented having been pulled from the bridge at such a critical time, but as commander of the vessel, he had to investigate any and all problems that arose, no matter how inconsequential they seemed to him. He knew that Ferreus would have simply killed the three men who were involved in the incident and moved on; that was why Piett had decided to deal with the situation himself. Ferreus was clearly a madman, and had no business being in command.

He's on my bridge, Piett noted as he entered the bridge. At once he knew that something was wrong. The men looked up at him as he walked onto the bridge, their faces clearly showing their horror.

"Is there something I can...?" Piett stopped as he saw the dead body of his first officer and good friend, Captain Reyal, lying on the floor of the bridge, his face distorted and blue from lack of oxygen. It took all of Piett's years of training and personal fortitude not to lose his composure.

"You can have this body removed," Ferreus said. "Such incompetence will not be tolerated."

"Incompetence, my lord?" Piett asked numbly as two crewmen lifted the body of Reyal from the floor.

"The Corellian freighter," Ferreus said. "Your dear captain here informed me that it had disappeared. You'll be happy to know that I have hired some professionals to help with the search, Piett, since clearly you aren't up to the task."

"What professionals do you mean, my lord?"

"Bounty hunters," Ferreus replied, taking credit for the idea that had actually been his master's. "They will find our little princess, make no mistake about that. I expect them to arrive within the hour. Be sure they are given a proper welcome when they do."

Piett merely nodded as Ferreus left the bridge once again.

"Sir, Captain Reyal did nothing wrong," one of the junior officers told Piett once the mad Sith lord was out of earshot. "And yet he..."

Piett nodded. "I know," he said, the anger and grief filling him. "He's gone too far this time, Jonas. We cannot simply stand by and allow him to kill everyone on this ship whenever he has a temper tantrum."

"What are you suggesting, sir?" Jonas asked.

Piett looked at the young officer. "I think you know, Captain."

Jonas nodded, the very thought of what Piett was suggesting making his palms sweat: mutiny.

Millennium Falcon

Leia was growing tired of waiting. They had been sitting inside the cave for more than ten hours now as Han and Chewbacca tried desperately to fix the temperamental hyperdrive. Her mind kept wandering back to the stolen moment she and Han had shared. She couldn't help but wonder what, if anything would develop from this. Had he kissed her simply on impulse, due to their close quarters and the direness of their situation? Or did he have true feelings for her? Han was not an easy man to read, for Leia had tried to do so. He shielded his feelings very well, only letting people know what he wanted them to know.

Leia's thoughts were interrupted by something outside the ship, a fluttering of wings and she stood up to get a better look. Suddenly a huge mouth attached itself to the view screen, causing Leia to scream and jump back. She ran back to the hold where Han was.

"There's something out there!" she told him frantically.

Han stopped what he was doing and looked up at her, lifting his goggles from his eyes. "Where?"

"Outside in the cave," she said. Just then the sound of something attacking the hull of the ship was heard.

"There it is!" Threepio cried. "Listen, listen!"

"I'm going out there," Han said, standing up at once.

"Are you crazy?" Leia replied.

"I just got this bucket back together," Han reminded her. "I'm not gonna let something tear it apart!" he added, grabbing an oxygen mask.

"Well then I'm going with you!" Leia declared, following Han, oxygen mask in hand.

The air was thick with moisture when Han, Leia and Chewbacca stepped off of the landing ramp. Not only that, there was a peculiar smell in the air, an organic smell, which was strange considering they were standing on solid rock. *Or were they?*

"I have a bad feeling about this," Leia said as the hairs on the back of her neck stood on end.

They soon found the source of the disturbance: mynocks.

Han took aim and blasted it, killing the large winged creature instantly. "Just what I thought," he said. "Mynocks. Chewie check the rest of the ship and make sure there's no more attached; they're chewing on the power cables."

"Mynocks," Leia muttered in horror.

"Go on inside," Han told her, "we'll clean 'em off if there are any more."

Leia started on her way back, only too happy to do so when a flock of mynocks swooped down among them, squawking angrily at their intrusion.

Han took out his blaster to scare them off. As he fired at the flying beasts, the asteroid started to shake violently.

"Wait a minute," he said as he began to realize what was going on. Taking his blaster, he pointed it directly at the floor of the asteroid. He fired, and immediately the asteroid started to quake fiercely, threatening to send Han, Leia and Chewbacca off their feet as they struggled to board the freighter.

"Fire up Chewie, let's get out of here!" Han shouted as they made their way to the cockpit.

"Maybe next time you'll listen to me when I have a bad feeling!" Leia told him as they took off. Ahead of them through the view screen they could see two rows of enormous teeth closing rapidly.

"The cave is collapsing!" Threepio cried in terror.

"This is no cave," Han replied as they burst out of the mouth of an enormous space slug and right back into the Imperial fleet.

"Didn't we just leave this party?" Han muttered.

"All the coordinates are set," Leia informed him after checking the navicomputer. "It's now or never."

"Punch it!" Han told Chewie, expecting the stars to coalesce and blur into one enormous stream of white light. But they did not. In fact, nothing happened.

"That's not fair!" Han cried. "The transfer circuits are all working, it's not my fault!"

"No lightspeed?" Leia asked, already knowing the answer.

He turned and looked at her, his face clearly showing how baffled he was. "It's not my fault!"

"Sir, we just lost the main rear deflector shield," Threepio informed Han. "One more direct hit on the back quarter and we're done for!"

Han acknowledged this dire announcement with a nod of his head, as he formulated a plan. "Turn her around," he said at last. Chewbacca roared in protest, insinuating quite strongly that Han had lost his mind. 'I said turn her around!' Han repeated, getting up. "I'm gonna throw all power in the front shield!"

"You're going to attack them?" Leia asked incredulously.

"Sir, the odds of surviving a direct assault on an Imperial Star Destroyer..." Threepio began to say but he was cut off by Leia.

"Shut up!" she merely said, knowing that is exactly what Han would say if he had the time to say it.

The Falcon banked, and made a steep twisting turn so that it was heading directly towards the Star Destroyer *Avenger*.

On the bridge of the *Avenger*, the officers and men were incredulous at the seemingly suicidal move.

"They're moving to attack position!" Captain Needa said in astonishment. "Shields up!"

Just then the *Falcon* flew right above the ship, close enough to cause the officers to duck involuntarily.

"Track them," Needa commanded. "They may come around for another pass."

"Captain Needa," one of the junior officers addressed him, "the ship no longer appears on any of our scopes."

Needa frowned. "They can't have disappeared!" he stated emphatically. "No ship that small has a cloaking device!"

"Well there's no trace of them sir!"

"Sir, Lord Ferreus is hailing us," the communications officer announced. "He demands an update on the pursuit of the freighter."

Needa's face blanched as he turned to his second in command. "Get a shuttle ready," he said grimly. "I shall assume full responsibility and apologize to Lord Ferreus. Meanwhile, continue to scan the area."

"Yes, Captain Needa."

Dagobah

Anakin spent the day observing his son's training and doing his best to avoid his wife. Each time he looked at her he was reminded of their night together, and it only served to augment the frustration he already felt. The situation was not made any better by the fact that it was nearly impossible to avoid her, for there were not a lot of places to go.

He half wondered if his explanation for why he had taken her from the institution had affected her at all. He had not given her a chance to reply, as he had left to go to take a shower, and when he had come out, she was gone. *If she won't believe me then there isn't much I can do*, he reasoned. *She knows how I feel; now it is up to her to decide how she feels.*

Padmé had spent the day considering what Anakin had told her. His candor had not surprised her, for he had always been most forthright with her. No, it was his words that had surprised her. ***I would rather have you remember everything and be the woman I love even if it means losing you than have you remain in that hell Palo created for you. You probably don't believe me, but that's the truth...*** How could she reconcile the man who had attacked her, the man who had terrorized the galaxy for twenty years with such selflessness? The possibility that she had been too harsh in her judgment of him started to creep into her mind. The fact that both Luke and Leia accepted and loved their father despite knowing all about his nefarious past was powerful evidence that Anakin had changed, that he was worthy of forgiveness and a second chance. *So why am I so afraid to give him one?*

Night had fallen, and after a long day of vigorous and physically demanding training, Luke was already sleeping soundly in his tent. Anakin was sitting by the fire, deep in thought when Padmé found him.

"Luke has gone to bed?" she asked him.

Anakin looked up at her and nodded.

“Yoda too?”

“I think so,” he replied.

Padmé couldn’t help but notice how guarded he was with her. *Not that I can blame him*, she thought. *I haven’t exactly been congenial with him lately.*

“May I join you?” she asked.

Anakin looked up at her again, surprised by her question. “Of course,” he said.

Padmé sat down beside him, trying to formulate the words she needed to say.

“I have been thinking all day about what you said earlier,” she told him.

“Oh?” he asked, knowing very well what it was she was referring to.

Padmé nodded. “Yes,” she replied. “I have to admit that I was rather surprised by what you said.”

Anakin turned and looked at her. “Why? If you know me at all you’d realize that is exactly what I would do. I’d die for you, Padmé; if you remember me as you say you do, then you’d know that.”

Padmé did not know how to reply, and stared into the fire for a moment. “I know you would,” she said at last, not looking at him. “I know that you sacrificed everything for me. And I know that were it not for you that I would have spent the rest of my life in that horrible place.”

Anakin turned to her. “Would you have preferred never knowing the truth?” he asked her pointedly. “Would it be easier not knowing what happened? What I did and what I became?”

“That’s hardly a fair question,” she said, becoming uncomfortable.

“Why?” he replied, sensing her uneasiness but deciding to lay it all on the line anyways. “Life is uncomfortable sometimes, Padmé, it gets messy sometimes. I think my question is a valid one. Knowing what you know now, would you rather have stayed under the care of that bastard Palo and never remember your past, including the painful parts of it?”

The mention of Palo brought a knot to Padmé’s stomach as her anger for what he did to her filled her. “I will never forgive him for what he did to me,” she said quietly. “Never.”

“And what about me, Padmé?” he asked pointedly. “Are he and I equal in your eyes? Will you ever forgive me for what I did to you? Or am I to be damned for the rest of my life by the sins of my past?”

“You are not equal with Palo, Anakin,” she replied at once. “Surely you know that!”

“I don’t know anything anymore, Padmé,” he told her, looking back into the fire. “Not a bloody thing.”

Padmé remained silent for a moment. He had built his defenses well, and she knew that it would take more than a little coaxing to get him to lower them. But Padmé Skywalker was a determined woman. When she set her mind to do something, she usually got results.

"You know everything about me, Anakin," she reminded him. "You know me better than I know myself."

"I thought I did," he said, picking up a small piece of twig and tossing it into the fire. "But now I'm not so sure."

"Anakin, stop it," she said at last, growing frustrated with his stubbornness. "Please just stop this."

"What am I doing now that you object to?" he asked, not looking at her.

"You've built this wall around yourself and you won't let me in," she told him. "How can we ever resolve this if you won't let me in?"

"What is there to resolve?" he asked. "You've already decided I am unworthy of forgiveness, you've made that pretty clear."

"I'm angry, and I'm hurt," she retorted. "Surely you can see why I'd feel that way!" "Yes, I know why you feel that way," he replied. "And you have every right to feel that way. What I did was horrible, unconscionable. I have lived with the consequences of what I did every day since Mustafar. If I must spend the rest of my life paying for that day, then so be it. I can only take your rejection so many times, Padmé. They may call me the Chosen One, but I'm only human."

A constriction in her throat prevented Padmé from replying. She had been so concerned with her own anger, her own pain that she had not considered his. What happened on Mustafar had been a moment of madness, a terrible mistake; she knew that now. No, it did not excuse what he did, nothing could do that. But hadn't he suffered as much as she had because of that day? The physical torment alone he suffered as a result of his duel with Obi-Wan Kenobi had been unimaginable; the emotional suffering at least ten times as agonizing. *They may call me the Chosen One, but I'm only human.* Somehow this very simple fact had been forgotten in all the upheaval. Anakin Skywalker may be the greatest Jedi who ever lived, the Chosen One, the Hero with No fear; but he was also a man; a man who had suffered more pain than anyone she knew, whose soul had been wounded by fear and by loss, by betrayal and suffering. He was her Ani.

"Ani," she said at last, her voice barely more than a whisper.

Anakin was surprised by the change in her tone, and turned to her. Seeing the tears in her eyes, he felt a small part of his defenses fall away. Her emotions were confusing him; they were too intense, too jumbled to read.

"I'm sorry, Padmé," he said one more time. "I don't know what else I can say."

Padmé nodded. "I know," she said as the tears spilled out of her eyes. "I know you are, Ani." Tentatively she reached a hand out to him and gently stroked his hair. He watched her, not saying a word, not daring to hope that the look in her eyes meant what he thought it did.

"I love you, Anakin," she said at last. "I have always loved you, and always will. I want things to be the way they were between us, before the war and Palpatine destroyed us. Do you think we could try again?"

For a moment, Anakin thought he was dreaming. How many times in the past few days had he dreamed of her saying these words to him? But this was no dream, this was real. His angel loved him, she wanted him, and she forgave him.

“My angel,” he simply said in reply as he smiled at her, and then pulled her into his arms. “My angel.”

Padmé wrapped her arms around his neck tightly. “I’ve missed you so much!” she told him tearfully.

Anakin closed his eyes, reveling in the sensation of her hair against his face. “I’ve been lost without you, Padmé,” he told her.

Chapter 52

Chapter 52

Admiral Piett watched as the body of Captain Needa was carried off of the bridge, the latest victim of Darth Ferreus.

"Where are they, Piett?" Ferreus asked petulantly as he approached the admiral. "How could they just...disappear?"

"Perhaps they were able to repair their hyperdrive," Piett suggested.

Ferreus nodded. "I suppose so," he frowned.

"If so, they could be on the other side of the galaxy by now," Piett told him. "Finding them will be like finding a needle in a haystack, sir."

Ferreus did not understand the analogy, having never seen neither a haystack nor a needle. But he understood enough to get the gist of what Piett was telling him.

"My lord, the bounty hunters have arrived," Captain Jonas informed Ferreus. "They are being shown to the bridge right now."

"Perfect timing," Ferreus said. He turned back to Piett. '*They won't fail me,*' he said. "Money is very motivating."

"Indeed it is," Piett replied, inwardly disgusted at the thought of bounty hunters. *We don't need that scum,* he reflected angrily. *But if it keeps him out of my hair, so much the better.*

Piett and Ferreus turned to watch as a motley group of creatures walked on to the bridge, some droids, some human, and some alien. Ferreus approached the group as they lined up around the perimeter of the bridge, looking at the crew of the *Executor* with undisguised hostility.

"Your job is a simple one," Ferreus told the group. 'Find the *Millennium Falcon*,' he said. "I want the Princess; I don't care about the rest. Kill them if you want, all I want is the girl. Your reward will be better than anything you've ever earned in your pathetic lives," he continued, unable to resist the opportunity to demean them.

Piett watched the exchange, unable to deny a growing feeling of dread. *This is getting out of hand... I have to stop him; someone has to stop him...*

Millennium Falcon

"Captain Solo, this time you have gone too far!"

Chewbacca growled irately.

"No, I will not be quiet, Chewbacca," Threepio whined. "Why doesn't anyone listen to me?"

"The fleet is beginning to break up," Han told Chewbacca. "Go back and stand by the manual release for the landing claw."

Chewie barked and then climbed out of his seat. He headed to the back of the *Falcon* as Threepio continued to voice his disapproval.

"I really don't see how that is going to help!" Threepio wailed. "Surrender is a perfectly acceptable alternative in extreme circumstances. The Empire may be gracious enough..."

Han looked back and gave Threepio a withering look. Leia took the hint and reached over and shut the droid off mid-sentence.

"Thank you," Han sighed.

"What did you have in mind for your next move?" Leia asked him.

"Well, if they follow standard Imperial procedure, they'll dump their garbage before they go to light-speed, then we just float away," Han said.

"With the rest of the garbage," Leia quipped. "Then what?"

"Then we've got to find a safe port somewhere around here. Got any ideas?" Han asked her.

"No. Where are we?" Leia asked.

"The Anoat system," Han said, looking at the navi-computer.

"Anoat system....there's not much there," Leia said thoughtfully.

"No," Han said, only half listening. "Well, wait. This is interesting. Lando."

"Lando system?" Leia asked, getting out of her seat to look at the map.

Han looked up at her briefly. "Lando's not a system, he's a man," he explained. "Lando Calrissian. He's this....card player, gambler, scoundrel... you'd like him."

Leia chuckled. "Thanks," she said.

"Bespin, it's pretty far but I think we can make it," Han said.

"A mining colony?" Leia asked.

"Yeah, a tibanna gas mine," Han told her. "Lando conned somebody out of it. We go way back, Lando and me."

"Can you trust him?" Leia asked him pointedly.

"No," Han replied immediately. "He's got no love for the Empire, I can tell you that," he said.

Chewbacca barked over the intercom, informing Han of the deployment of the fleet.

"Stand by Chewie," Han told his copilot. "Detach."

Leia smiled and looked at Han. "You have your moments," she told him. "Not many of them, but you do have them." She bent over and gave him a kiss.

Han simply smiled as the *Falcon* drifted free of the hull of the *Avenger* along with the refuse the star destroyer had just jettisoned. The *Falcon*'s engines ignited and it raced off into the distance. Amidst the slowly drifting junk, a ship appeared and moved after the *Falcon*.

Dagobah

The air was thick with moisture, or perhaps it was fog. It was everywhere, nebulous and multi-colored as the sun penetrated its translucence.

A figure in black appeared, tall and cloaked, a Sith... he wore an expression of lewd mockery... just then from the shadows he pulled a small figure, a young woman clad in white... the woman was crying, her clothes were torn, she was terrified, and the monstrous thing who held her tightly by her slender wrist laughed, jerking her roughly by the arm again, making the girl cry out in pain... the black clad monster took his other hand and struck her across the face, sending her sprawling to the floor...the girl tried to get away only to have the monster reach out with the Force and pin her to the floor... she screamed as he advanced upon her menacingly...

Padmé woke up as her husband thrashed about in the small bed beside her. She turned to him, the look on his face telling her that he was in the throes of a nightmare. Padmé reached her hand out to him and shook his shoulder gently.

"Anakin, wake up," she said. "Wake up."

Anakin opened his eyes and looked over at his wife. He was disoriented for a moment, not expecting to wake up in his wife's bed.

"Padmé?" he said.

"You were having a nightmare," she told him, stroking his face gently. "Are you okay?"

Anakin sat up in the bed, his heart still pounding from the terrifying apparitions of his dream. "Leia..." he said simply. "Leia's in trouble."

Padmé frowned. "You dreamed about Leia?"

Anakin nodded. "But it wasn't just a dream, Padmé," he said, turning to her. "It was a vision — I was seeing the future, I'm certain of it."

Padmé felt a chill run down her spine. "Ani," she said softly. "Where is she? What is going to happen to her?"

"Nothing will happen to her, I promise you," he said, getting out of bed. "I will make sure of it."

"But where is she? How will you know where to go?" she asked, getting out of the bed too.

"A city surrounded by clouds," he said, remembering his dream.

Padmé thought for a moment. "Bespin?" she suggested.

"Yes, that is it," he said. "I have to go to her, Padmé. I have to help her!"

Padmé nodded. "I'm coming with you."

"Padmé, no," Anakin told her, starting to get dressed. "This will be dangerous, I'm certain of it. I won't put you in that position."

"Ani, I haven't seen Leia since she was a baby," Padmé told him. "I need to go with you; I need to ensure that she's okay."

Anakin considered her words. "I don't like this," he grumbled as he sat down on the bed and pulled on his boots.

"Too bad," she told him as she buttoned her tunic. "I'm coming."

Anakin and Padmé found Luke and Yoda sitting near the camp site. Luke looked up when he saw his parents approaching. It was clear from his face that he was upset.

"You saw it too, didn't you?" Anakin asked his son, knowing the reason that Luke was so distraught.

Luke nodded. "I saw a city in the clouds," he told his parents. "Leia and Han were there... they were in pain."

"I had a similar vision," Anakin told his son. "We need to get to her before this vision comes true, Luke. We must go to Bespin."

Yoda listened quietly to the conversation, keeping his opinion to himself. He had been having visions of a new Sith apprentice for weeks now, and was beginning to wonder if it was more than mere old age making him paranoid. Was there a connection between this vision and the one shared by Anakin and his son?

"There's something else," Anakin said, turning to Yoda as though he knew what the old Jedi master had been pondering. "I saw a Sith, Master Yoda. I believe Sidious has found a new apprentice."

Yoda nodded. "Correct you are, Anakin, in your interpretation of this vision," he said. "Foreseen this new apprentice I have. Confront him you must, destroy him you will."

If he lays a finger on my daughter he's as good as dead already, Anakin thought angrily. "It will be done," he said. "This Sith monster will rue the day he was born if he dares to harm my child, I swear it."

Cloud City

The air was thick with moisture, or perhaps it was fog. It was everywhere, nebulous and multi-colored as the sun penetrated its translucence. Surrounded by spectacular shades of pink, red and orange, the *Millennium Falcon* made its final approach to Cloud City.

Twin-pod cloud cars drew up alongside the *Falcon*, making the occupants in the cockpit more than a little nervous, particularly when one of them opened fire on the Falcon, its flak rocking the small ship.

"No, I don't have a landing permit," Han did his best to explain into the comm.. "I'm trying to reach Lando Calrissian."

The immediate reply to his explanation was more flak bursts outside the cockpit window.

"Whoa! Wait a minute! Let me explain!" Han exclaimed.

“You will not deviate from your present course,” the voice on the comm. ordered.

“Rather touchy, aren’t they?” Threepio declared.

Leia began to grow concerned, that same nagging feeling coming back. “I thought you knew this person?” she said to Han.

Leia’s question heralded a long series of barks and growls from Chewbacca, making Leia even more uneasy.

“Well, that was a long time ago,” Han replied to his copilot. “I’m sure he’s forgotten about that.”

“Forgotten about what??” Leia demanded. But Han did not have a chance to reply before the voice returned on the comm..

“Permission granted to land on Platform Three-two-seven.”

“Thank you,” Han replied, an edge of sarcasm in his voice. Han snapped off the intercom. He then turned back to Leia, whose face betrayed her worry. ‘There’s nothing to worry about,’ he assured her. “We go back, Lando and me.”

“Who’s worried?” Leia asked, the fear blooming within her.

The clouds parted to reveal a full view of the city. With the cloud cars still guarding it, the Falcon approached the gleaming metropolis and then landed on one of the Cloud City’s platforms.

Having lowering the ramp, Han and Leia made their way to the platform, blasters at the ready. Chewbacca followed, equally warily.

“Oh. No one to meet us,” Threepio observed.

Leia shook her head, unable to shake the feeling that they were walking into a trap. “I don’t like this,” she said at last, stopping in her tracks. “This is a mistake, Han.”

“We don’t have a choice, sweetheart,” Han replied. “No hyperdrive means our options are limited. And if the Empire is after us, we won’t get far with a lame ship. They let us land, after all,” he pointed out.

Leia was not consoled by his words. “Yes, they did,” she conceded. “I just can’t shake the feeling that...”

She stopped as an assorted group of men and aliens approached them on the landing platform. The leader of the group, a suave looking man in his thirties, bore a grim expression on his face as he headed towards them.

Han looked back at Leia. “Nothing to worry about, Sweetheart,” he told her. “Here comes my friend right now.”

Leia simply nodded, not taking her eyes from the approaching band.

“Keep your eyes open,” Han said quietly to Chewie, who heartily agreed with Han’s precaution.

Lando stopped two meters from Han, hands on his hips, eying Han carefully. Lando shook his head. "Why, you slimy, double-crossing, no-good swindler! You've got a lot of guts coming here, after what you pulled."

Great, Leia thought. With friend like this...

Han was stunned, and could only point to himself innocently, mouthing, "*Me?*"

Lando moved threateningly toward Han, who prepared himself for the worst. Suddenly, Lando threw his arms around Han and embraced him, laughing heartily.

"How you doing, you old pirate?" Lando exclaimed all smiles all of a sudden. "So good to see you! I never thought I'd catch up with you again. Where you been?"

Leia watched as the two old friends embraced, laughing and chuckling. Despite his outward appearance of affability, Leia still did not trust the suave administrator, and folded her arms over her chest as she did her best to get a read on him.

"What are you doin' here?" Lando asked.

"Ah, repairs," Han said, jerking a thumb in the direction of the *Falcon*. "Thought you could help me out."

"What have you done to my ship?" Lando asked in mock horror.

"*Your* ship?" Han replied. "Hey, remember; you lost her to me fair and square."

Lando merely chuckled in response and turned to Chewbacca. "And how are you doing, Chewbacca? Still hanging around with this loser?" He then caught sight of Leia, and the suave smile returned to his face. 'Hello, what have we here?' he purred, pushing past Chewbacca. "I'm Lando Calrissian, the administrator of this facility. And who might you be?"

"Leia," she replied simply, not impressed by Lando's efforts to be charming.

"Welcome Leia," Lando said, taking her hand and kissing it gallantly.

"Alright, alright," Han said, taking Leia's hand from him. "You old smoothie."

Leia couldn't help but laugh at Han's obvious jealousy, and allowed him to lead her toward the entrance of the city.

"What's wrong with the *Falcon*?" Lando asked as they walked along.

"What else? Hyperdrive," Han replied.

"I'll get my people to work on it," Lando offered. He turned to Leia. 'You know that ship has saved my life quite a few times,' he told her, "it's the fastest hunk of junk in the galaxy!"

Leia merely nodded, doing her best to appear cordial, while inside her mistrust only grew. *You're hiding something, Lando*, she thought to herself. *What is it?* She felt certain that soon enough they would find out for themselves.

Chapter 53

Chapter 53

Obi-Wan Kenobi stood staring out the large viewscreen, arms folded over his chest. He was deep in meditation, his mind focused on his padawan. He still had not forgiven himself, or her, for the easy manner in which she had ditched him back on Hoth. *I must be getting old*, he thought to himself. *Still, she is her father's child.*

He could sense that Leia was in danger, but that help was on the way in the form of her father and brother. Still, he felt that he, as her master and guardian, needed to do what he could to help too. But what could he do on the other side of the galaxy from the planet Bespin?

"Still no word from the Princess," General Reikan informed Obi-Wan as he joined him. "It's been almost four days."

Obi-Wan nodded. "She's alive," he told Reikan. "But she's in danger."

Reikan frowned. "With the Empire out there, all of us are," he commented.

Obi-Wan turned to look at the man. "No, I mean personal, serious danger," he said. "And not just because she's a Rebel, because she's a Jedi. The Emperor wants her, General, and will stop at nothing to find her and take her as his apprentice, or destroy her in the process."

Reikan knew little of such matters, but trusted Kenobi enough to know he was telling the truth. "But what can we do to help her?" he asked.

"I must go to her," Obi-Wan said. "As her Jedi Master my place is at her side."

"How will you know how to find....never mind," Reikan said, reasoning the Jedi had abilities far beyond his understanding. "I suppose you'll need a ship then."

Kenobi nodded. "Yes," he said. "As soon as possible."

Bespin-Cloud City

"Ship's almost finished," Han announced as he entered the small suite where he and Leia had been residing. "Two or three more things and we're in great shape."

"The sooner the better," Leia replied with relief. "I know I've said this before, and I know he's your friend, but I don't trust this Lando character. He's hiding something Han, I'm sure of it."

Han sighed as he sat down, watching Leia as she pace about in the small room. "Like what?"

"I don't know," she said. "But I know he is. He's setting us up, Han, I just know it."

"Why would he do that?" Han asked. "He hates the Empire as much as we do, remember?"

Leia shrugged. "That may be," she conceded. "But sometimes people do things for selfish reasons. Lando Calrissian doesn't exactly strike me as the type of person to put himself out on a limb for anyone."

"You're right about that," Han agreed. "But that doesn't mean that..."

His sentence was interrupted by the entrance of Lando Calrissian into the room.

"I'm sorry, am I interrupting?" he asked smoothly.

"Not really," Leia replied coolly, stepping closer to Han.

"You look absolutely beautiful," Lando said with a smile. "You truly belong here with us among the clouds."

Han rolled his eyes and covered his mouth to hide a smirk at his friend's attempt to be charming.

"Thank you," Leia replied, unimpressed by Lando's compliment.

"Would you care to join me for some refreshment?" Lando asked, extending a hand to Leia. "I'm sure you all must be hungry by now."

Leia looked back at Han and then reluctantly took Lando's hand as Han stood up to join them. "Yeah, we are, aren't we sweetheart?" Han said, holding out his arm to Leia.

Leia nodded as she took Han's arm. Chewbacca was already at the door, obviously as hungry as ever, barking with enthusiasm. Leia was hungry too, but that wasn't the most prevailing feeling she was experiencing. *This is it*, she thought, preparing herself for what she was certain was about to happen.

Han and Lando engaged in meaningless small talk about the gas mine as they walked through the pristine, white hallways of Cloud City. Leia only half listened, for her senses were attuned to the impending danger that she felt was approaching.

"So aren't you afraid the Empire's gonna find out about this little operation and shut you down?" Han asked Lando.

"That's always been a danger that's loomed like a shadow over everything we've built here," Lando replied. "But things have developed that will ensure security," he continued. He stopped in front of a doorway, his expression becoming serious all of a sudden. "I've just made a deal that will keep the Empire out of here forever."

From down the corridor a group of Imperial officers approached, as a squadron of clones surrounded them. Han's blaster was taken away from him before he had a chance to fire.

"I had no choice," Lando explained lamely. "They arrived right before you did. I'm sorry."

Han shook his head. "You bastard," he spat as he and Chewbacca were bound by their wrists. He looked at Leia. "I should have listened to you," he said, his eyes full of anguish. "I'm sorry, Leia..."

Leia could only stand and watch as he and Chewbacca were lead away, leaving her and Threepio alone with their captors.

"Where are you taking them?" Leia asked, turning her attention back to the imperial officer in charge.

"No need to concern yourself with them, Princess Leia. You shall see them soon enough."

Leia turned to see another figure emerge from the group of clones and officers. He was dressed all in black, and looked at Leia with an expression of undisguised lewdness. Leia suddenly remembered where she had seen him: the hangar bay on Hoth. *This is Palpatine's new apprentice...*

"Come with me, your highness," Ferreus said as he took Leia by the arm and escorted her away. "We have much to discuss."

Nubian Cruiser-en route to Bespin

Anakin was lost in thought, his mind in turmoil as he focused on his daughter, knowing for certain that at that very moment she was in grave danger. *Where are you Kenobi?* he thought angrily. *And why aren't you there to protect my daughter like you swore to?*

"ETA to Bespin is two point two hours," Luke told his father after checking the navi-computer.

"Push it harder," Anakin told his son. "That's too long."

Padmé stood up behind her husband and put her hands on his shoulders. She could feel the tension in his muscles and massaged them to try to alleviate his tension. "Leia has to be alright," Padmé said. "She just has to be."

Anakin did not wish to disclose all that his vision had shown him to his wife; but she knew her husband well enough to realize that when he was this worried, it was for good reason.

"I will make sure of it, Padmé," Anakin told her, squeezing her hand lightly. "I promise you."

Padmé nodded, knowing that Anakin meant what he said, but also knowing that at present Leia's circumstances were beyond even his control.

"I don't understand why Leia is separate from the rest of the Alliance," Padmé said.

"No, neither do I," Luke said. "Even if the Alliance had been forced to evacuate Hoth, which may have been what happened, they would do so en masse."

"Obviously something has happened to separate her from the rest," Anakin pointed out. 'As well as from Obi-Wan, for I know she would not be in this danger now if he were with her.' He shook his head in frustration. "Can you get any more out of those engines, Luke?"

Luke nodded. "Yeah, R2's managed a little more Dad," he told him. "We should arrive there in a little under an hour now."

Anakin sighed, the frown not leaving his face. "I just hope that's enough time," he said softly.

Cloud City-Bespin

Leia could feel the hairs on the back of her neck standing on end as she was lead away by the terrifying Sith. She could sense his evil intentions towards her, and they repulsed her. More than that, they frightened her; for while she had some training as a Jedi, she was certainly no match for a Sith, not yet. *And I don't even have a light saber*, she reflected grimly.

"Please, sit down," Ferreus said as they entered a small room.

Leia did as she was bade, her eyes never leaving her adversary.

"So, you are the daughter of the famous Anakin Skywalker," he began, sitting down and regarding her appraisingly.

"Who will cut you into bite sized pieces for this outrage," she replied evenly.

Ferreus merely laughed. "I'm not afraid of him," he said smoothly, pushing his cloak over his shoulder and leaning forward to look at her closely. "He's an old crippled man. I, however, am in the prime of my life. He's no match for me."

Leia shook her head, a smile of derision forming on her face. "You really have no clue what you're talking about," she told him. "But I have a feeling that you will find out soon enough."

"And what is that supposed to mean?" Ferreus replied, getting annoyed at Leia's refusal to tremble in fear of him.

"You're a Sith, aren't you?" she replied, folding her arms over her chest. "Aren't you supposed to be able to foresee the future? And *you* replaced my father? Please!"

Ferreus lost his temper and struck her hard across the face. "Enough," he said, standing up and grabbing her roughly by the arm. "You want proof of my power? I'll give you the proof you need, Princess."

With Leia in tow, Ferreus headed down the corridor pulling her along brusquely. They entered a room, and Leia could not help but gasp in horror when she saw what was going on within.

Han had been restrained to a platform at a 45 degree angle away from the floor. Ferreus nodded to the trooper at his side who lowered him to a rather insidious rack of torture devices.

"No don't!" Leia cried, trying to run to Han. Ferreus grabbed her again and held her against the front of his body.

"Just so you won't have any further doubt about me, Princess," he said into her ear, making Leia's blood run cold.

Even as he was being lowered, electric jolts hit Han's body, causing excruciating pain. Though stoic at first, as the intensity of the jolts increase, Han could no longer keep from screaming in agony.

"Please stop!" Leia cried, doing her best to wrench away from her captor. "Please!"

“Carry on,” Ferreus said, pulling Leia from the room. *Now I have you where I want you, little Princess*, he thought with perverse satisfaction. *Now we understand one another*.

“Perhaps you will no longer question my authority, Princess,” Ferreus said as Leia sobbed against the bulkhead. She forced herself to regain her composure, and looked up at Ferreus with utter hatred in her eyes.

“What do you want from me?” she asked at last.

Ferreus merely smiled in response.

Chapter 54

Chapter 54

“Now, your highness,” Ferreus said smugly as he shoved her back into the small room where they had sat earlier. “About our discussion.”

Leia sat with arms folded, legs crossed, doing her best to master the trembling she felt throughout her. The image of Han in agony would not leave her mind, his screams still echoed in her ears. What good was all the Jedi training she’d received now when she was helpless to stop him from suffering so?

“We have nothing to discuss,” she finally said, her voice full of anger and pain.

Ferreus smiled. “Oh but we do,” he replied, leaning back in his chair easily. “We do. My master seems to think that you are of vital importance, you and your twin brother.”

Leia did her best not to react to the mention of Luke. Luckily Ferreus’ ability to read the thoughts and emotions of others was rather unimpressive, and she managed to appear unaffected by his statement.

“In fact,” Ferreus went on, doing his best to get to her, “he has promised me a great reward when I bring your brother to him. And that reward is you, my pretty little princess.”

Ferreus’ thoughts were easily read, and they repulsed Leia. “It is a shame you shall never live to collect your reward,” she said at this point, using the Force to calm herself. “For should you ever cross paths with my brother, he will remove that smug look from your face permanently.”

To her surprise, Ferreus merely laughed and stood up. “You know, I do have to say, Princess Leia,” he said as he walked around to behind her chair. ‘That I admire a woman with spirit.’ He bent down so that he was right behind her. Leia felt his breath upon her neck, and did her best not to shudder visibly by his close proximity. When he reached his hands up to place them on her shoulders, it was all she could do not to jump out of her seat. “You know, Princess,” he said, running a finger down one side of her neck slowly. “I don’t believe I’ve ever had a member of a royal household before,” he said lecherously. “I’m looking forward to it a great deal.”

Leia closed her eyes and focused on the living Force in an effort to calm herself. The man’s intentions were clear; but Leia was not totally defenseless. Having had an opportunity to study her opponent now, she had a feeling that her Force abilities, even at their early stage, were at least a match for Ferreus’. She decided it was time to test her theory. She lifted a hand and summoned the Force, sending Ferreus back against the wall. Leia sprang to her feet and made it to the doorway. Ferreus, stunned momentarily by her surprising attack, lunged after her angrily. Leia screamed as she felt him grab her by the arm, ripping the fabric of her sleeve.

“You little bitch!” Ferreus roared as he pushed her against the floor with the Force. “You’ll regret that!”

Leia tried to free herself, but Ferreus’ anger was great, and so the Dark side held her firm to the floor as he advanced upon her menacingly. “You’ll pay for your foolishness, little princess,” he said as he bent down to her, grasping the fabric of her jacket with one hand. Passersby in the corridor looked with shock for a moment as they saw the commotion, but the feral look on Ferreus’ face was enough to stop them from interfering as he dragged her back into the room. He’d almost succeeded when a voice was heard that stopped him.

“Release her!”

“Obi-Wan!” Leia cried as she saw her master standing before them, lightsaber in hand.

“Run, Leia,” he commanded her, his voice strong with authority and the Force. Leia took advantage of Ferreus’ momentary distraction to escape his grasp and scramble to her feet. She raced to Obi-Wan and embraced him tightly, the fear she was filled with spilling out of her.

“You’re safe now, Leia,” Obi-Wan told her, not taking his eyes off of Ferreus’ for a moment. ‘Take this,’ he said, handing her a blaster. “I will deal with this monster, go and find help.”

Leia hated to leave him alone, but reasoned that he was more capable of handling Ferreus than she was. Brushing the tears from her face, she pulled the ripped fabric of her jacket together and took off down the corridor, leaving her master to fight the vile Sith.

Anakin, Padmé and Luke entered Cloud City, armed and on high alert. They had spotted the Imperial star destroyers in orbit and it had taken Anakin’s Force abilities and knowledge of Imperial procedures in order to bypass them undetected.

“I sense Obi-Wan,” Anakin said, standing and focusing on Kenobi’s presence. He frowned as he sensed a great disturbance, as he sensed the great waves of terror and pain emanating from his daughter. He turned and looked at Luke, his blue eyes narrowed. ‘You two find Leia,’ he said. “I have someone to deal with.”

“Anakin wait!” Padmé cried, but he ran off down the corridor without a second look back.

“Come on, Mom,” Luke said, taking Padmé’s hand. “Dad can take care of himself. We need to get to Leia.”

As Leia had made her way back to the detention block, she came across Threepio wandering aimlessly about, not really knowing where to go. When he saw her he was relieved beyond relief.

“Mistress Leia!” he exclaimed. ‘Where have you been?’

“Find out where they’re holding Chewie,” she told him. “And come help me!”

“But! But!” Threepio sputtered. “Oh!” he said peevishly, not understanding the completely irrational behavior of humans.

When she reached the area where Han was being held captive, she saw Boba Fett and Lando Calrissian standing outside the room in conversation. When Fett saw her approaching, he raised his blaster to fire, only to have Lando give his arm a shove, forcing him to misfire and causing his blaster to fall to the floor. Leia, though surprised by Lando’s move, took

advantage of it and fired at Fett, hitting him squarely in the chest. The blast merely deflected off of the armor, and so Leia fired again, and again, the impact sending Fett back against the wall, but not injuring him. He raised one arm to shoot at Leia with the rocket blaster situated on his forearm. He got off a couple of shots, which Leia managed to dodge.

“The neck, Leia!” Lando shouted. “Aim for the neck!”

Not giving Fett a chance to shoot with the other arm, Leia aimed squarely for his throat, causing him to splutter and gurgle horrifically as his own blood strangled him. “See you in hell, scum,” Lando spat as the body of the nefarious Fett tumbled to the floor.

“This way,” Lando told Leia, as she stared at the bloody body on the floor.

It had all happened so quickly that Leia had no choice but to accept Lando’s help, and merely nodded as he took her hand and headed down the corridor. Clones were on guard outside Han’s cell, and were quickly dispatched by Leia and Lando.

Leia burst into the room, ready to kill anyone who stood between her and Han, only to find him alone, lying on a hard bench.

“Han!” she cried as she rushed to him while Lando covered the door.

Han opened his eyes, and when he saw Leia he tried to smile. “I feel terrible,” he said weakly.

Leia stroked his hair gently, the tears streaming down her face. “I was so scared,” she whispered, the feelings she had been trying to deny for so long bubbling to the surface. She pressed her face to his. “I was so scared I’d lose you.”

Han smiled wanly. “I’m not goin’ anywhere, sweetheart,” he assured her. ‘Just need a little rest, that’s all.’ The faint smile he wore faded when he saw the bruises on her face and her torn clothing. Frowning, he struggled to get up on one elbow. “Who did this to you?” he demanded angrily. “Who?”

Leia shook her head. “Never mind me,” she said, pushing him back down gently. “I’m fine. Obi-Wan has arrived, he’ll help us get out of here.”

Han rested back on the bench, the frown not leaving his face. “I should have listened to you,” he told her, reaching up and lightly touching her battered face. “Next time I don’t, I give you permission to kick me square in the cocky Corellian butt.”

Leia couldn’t help but laugh at him, and a rush of emotion filled her. She bent down and kissed him softly. “I love you, Han,” she told him, stroking her hair. “I know that sounds crazy, but I do.”

Han smiled. “Doesn’t sound so crazy to me,” he replied, closing his eyes. “I’m a pretty loveable guy.”

“Princess, we have visitors.”

Leia looked over at the door to where Lando stood just in time to see her brother and mother enter the room.

“Leia!” Padmé exclaimed, seeing her daughter for the first time.

“Mother!” Leia cried, running to her mother. They embraced tightly, Leia crying with relief and pent up emotion.

“You okay?” Luke said to Han who had managed to sit up by this point with Luke’s assistance.

Han nodded. “Yeah, I think so,” he said. “How did you know to find us here? No, let me guess. The Force.”

Luke smiled. “Where’s Chewie? He okay?”

“I...I don’t know,” Han said, still disoriented. “Your dad here too?”

“He’s gone after someone,” Luke said. “I don’t know who.”

“Ferreus,” Lando told them. ‘The bastard who set all this up,’ he went on. He looked at Leia. “The one who attacked you, Princess.”

Leia nodded her understanding, a grim smile of satisfaction on her face. “Well he has no idea what he’s in for,” she said. “He doesn’t know that Anakin Skywalker is alive and well.”

Padmé looked at Lando. “Who is this Ferreus?” she asked suspiciously.

“Palpatine’s new apprentice,” Leia told her mother. ‘A Sith, or a Sith pretender,’ she said. “He won’t last five minutes with Dad, assuming Obi-Wan hasn’t killed him already.”

“Ben is here?” Luke asked.

Leia nodded. “He saved me,” she told her brother. “If it hadn’t been for him...” she stopped as she realized how close she had come to being raped by the villainous Ferreus. “He came just in time.”

“Maybe I should go and help him,” Luke said, standing up. “You stay here with Leia,” he told his mother.

“I’m afraid no one is going anywhere,” an officer at the doorway said as he appeared with a phalanx of storm troopers. “At least, not at the moment.”

Chapter 55

Chapter 55

Ferreus stood in the doorway sizing up his opponent. He'd heard the princess call him Obi-Wan; could this be Obi-Wan Kenobi? The great hero of the Clone Wars? *Surely he was dead by now, killed in the purges along with all the other traitors.*

"You'll be sorry you interfered, old man," Ferreus warned as he took his own weapon from his belt.

Obi-Wan was not intimidated by the younger man's attempts to bully him. "I was about to say the same thing," he replied at last. "How curious."

Ferreus frowned and ignited his saber. "You Jedi think you're so superior," he sneered, approaching Kenobi slowly. "So self-righteous, so noble. So why is it there are none of you left, save a pathetic few like you?"

"I think you know very well why," Obi-Wan countered. "We were betrayed by that thing you call your master. The time of the Sith is about to end, though. You and your master will be destroyed, bringing an end to the Sith's reign of terror forever."

Ferreus laughed and lunged hard at Obi-Wan. "I don't think so, old man," he said over their crossed blades.

Obi-Wan had not been involved in a duel in many years; age and lack of practice had taken their toll on him. He did his utmost to fend off the crude moves of the Sith, using his superior Force abilities to make up for Ferreus' superior physical strength. However, it wasn't long before he began to tire under the younger man's unrelenting attack. Ferreus saw this, and pushed harder, sensing that victory was near.

"The Sith shall never die, you old fool," Ferreus gloated. "Today will mark the end of the Jedi, not the Sith. You and your pathetic Skywalker twins will all be destroyed, and the Sith shall rule forever!"

"You're gravely mistaken, Sith."

Ferreus and Obi-Wan turned to see Anakin Skywalker standing before them, lightsaber held out in front of him.

"Anakin!" Obi-Wan exclaimed, seeing him.

"Looks like I'm saving your skin again, doesn't it?" Anakin said, not taking his eyes from Ferreus.

"Well isn't this charming," Ferreus said, trying to hide his alarm at seeing a very healthy and strong Anakin Skywalker rather than his predecessor, Darth Vader. 'A reunion of old friends,' he sneered. "So sorry to have to end it so soon," he added, taking Obi-Wan's moment of distraction and thrusting him against the far wall. Kenobi hit the wall hard, and landed unconscious.

Anakin sensed that Obi-Wan was alive, but the sight of his old master injured only added to his fury, which he was doing his best to keep in check. He looked over at Ferreus, his blue eyes cold as Hoth. He could sense the man's shock and fear at seeing him, and it almost made him smile. "You were expecting someone else," he said simply, startling Ferreus with the ease with which he read his thoughts. "Sorry to disappoint you."

Ferreus snorted derisively. "Disappointed? Quite the contrary, Skywalker," he said. "I've been looking forward to telling you how much I enjoyed your daughter."

For a moment Anakin went utterly still, his mind bombarded with images too horrible to speak of. "You're lying," he said at last, his voice low and full of anger. "You're lying!"

It was Ferreus' turn to smile. "Do you know I don't believe I've ever bedded a princess before," he goaded. "Not that there was a bed involved, actually..." With a shout of blind fury, Anakin attacked, lunging furiously at Ferreus who had no choice but to back pedal. Anakin forced Ferreus down the corridor, striking his blade furiously, with more aggression than Ferreus could have imagined him possible of. Anakin's strength and mastery of the Force both astounded and terrified Ferreus, who was beginning to think that he was in over his head. This was no crippled old man he was fighting; Skywalker was still young, incredibly strong and perfectly healthy. More than that, he was lethal.

Anakin could see the terror in Ferreus' eyes, who was too untrained to hide it, and he pressed him harder. "You *are* a liar," he spat. "I can see it in your mind, you pathetic fool!"

Ferreus tried to respond, but Anakin leapt over his head, confusing and disorienting him momentarily. But it was enough to give Anakin the second he needed to disarm his vastly inferior foe, who could only stand and look in shock at his opponent who now stood poised to kill him.

"Don't kill me," Ferreus implored, losing all shred of pride in the face of his own demise. "Please! I'll do anything you want! I'm begging you!"

Flashes from the past, to a duel on a separatist ship with Count Dooku came to Anakin's mind. He had Dooku's life in his hands, but what had he done? Had he done the right thing? Or had he taken the first step on the path that eventually led him to utter darkness? *But he deserves to die!* A voice inside of him protested. *For even daring to think of doing such a thing to Leia! Surely that alone is worthy of death!*

Ferreus could see the indecision in Anakin's eyes, and it confused him. But more than that, it gave him an opportunity. Pulling his sleeve back, he withdrew a lethal set of lightclaws hidden in the folds of his cloak. Moving faster than Anakin would have given him credit for, he lunged at Anakin, the deadly short blades packing just as much lethal power as a lightsaber.

As is often the case, however, Ferreus vastly underestimated his opponent, who saw the move coming in his mind seconds before Ferreus' executed it. With one blade, Anakin sliced through the wrist that held the claws, the other he held to Ferreus' throat.

"Foolish mistake," he said, shaking his head. "Don't you realize it is the destiny of the Chosen One to destroy the Sith?"

"Go to Hell, Skywalker," Ferreus snarled.

"I'll leave that to you," Anakin replied. "But you can go to Hell with the knowledge that your master will soon be joining you."

"No!" Ferreus screamed, but his cry was cut short by his own blade slicing his throat open. He fell to the floor.

Anakin turned off both sabers at once, and then tossed Ferreus' to the floor beside his dead body. He then turned and left the bloodied spectacle and went to find Obi-Wan.

"Step inside if you please," the officer said, indicating the open door from whence Luke had just stepped. Surrounded by clones with their weapons trained on him, he had no choice but to comply.

"Now what!" Leia asked as she saw Luke return with an armed escort.

"Don't be alarmed, Princess Leia," the officer said to her. 'I assure you I'm here to help you.' He turned to the clones. "Stand down," he instructed them, and at once they lowered their weapons and stood at ease. He turned back to Padmé and her children. "My name is Firmus Piett, I am commander of the Imperial Star Destroyer *Executor*," he explained. "And for the past several weeks I have had the decided misfortune to serve under the vile, despicable creature known as Darth Ferreus."

"You have my sympathies," Leia said wryly at this point.

Piett looked at her, taking note of the bruises on her face. "I trust he did not harm you too greatly, Princess?"

"He would have if Obi-Wan Kenobi hadn't shown up when he did," Leia told him. "He was about to rape me, I'm certain of it."

Padmé looked at her daughter in horror. "Oh, Leia," she said with a frown, taking Leia's hand. 'I had no idea! What a monster!' She turned to Piett. "You served this man and you expect us to trust you?"

Piett smiled. "I can certainly understand your reluctance, milady," he said. "But I assure you that I am finished serving him. In fact, the entire crew of the *Executor* is finished, and we have decided to mutiny."

Everyone in the room was too shocked to reply. Finally it was Han who spoke up. "Mutiny? An Imperial Star Destroyer? Who do you take us for, idiots?"

"I am the greatest earnest, I assure you," Piett replied, looking at them each in turn. "When I found out what the emperor's plan was, to get revenge on Darth Vader by destroying his children, I was appalled. I know the Empire is corrupt; you don't serve in an intuition as long as I have without learning a few things. But that crossed the line. Darth Vader may have been ruthless in his time, but the fact that he gave up that life to save you, Princess, speaks volumes of the quality of man he is."

"No truer words ever spoken," Padmé said.

"I found it reprehensible that Palpatine would punish such decency, and would use such a disgusting character to see it done," Piett continued. "I think the final straw was the blatant disregard Ferreus showed for the crew of the ship under his command. He abused his power, killing on a whim, parading whores through the vessel like it was his own personal brothel."

When he killed my life time friend for something that he could not be faulted for, I decided that I'd had enough. It didn't take much to convince them to join me, for many of them had felt the wrath of Ferreus upon them."

"Your words are very moving, Admiral," Padmé said at last. "But I'm afraid I don't understand what you are proposing. If you wish to mutiny, that is certainly understandable; but why involve my family in your insurrection?"

"Because you are the family of Anakin Skywalker," Piett replied. "The greatest Jedi who ever lived. And you," he added, addressing Luke and Leia, "are heroes of the Rebel Alliance. Who better to join forces with?"

"Let me get this straight," Luke said at this point. "Are you suggesting that you want to *join* the rebellion against the Empire?"

"Yes, that is exactly what I am suggesting," Piett replied.

"The alliance with the help of an Imperial Star Destroyer would be..." Leia began.

"A force to be reckoned with."

Everyone turned to the door to see Anakin standing there, an arm around a rather woozy looking Obi-Wan.

"Dad!" Leia cried, running to her father at once. Anakin took Leia into his free arm and held her tightly. Piett watched the exchange between father and daughter, smiling to himself as he realized that he had made the right choice.

"Thank the Maker you're alright," Anakin told his daughter as he kissed the top of her head. "I've been so worried."

Leia only nodded, knowing that if she responded the tears that she was fighting so hard to control would be back at once.

"Come and have a seat, Ben," Luke said as he helped Obi-Wan to the same hard bench where Han had rested earlier. "You okay?" he asked as Obi-Wan sat down.

"I think so," Obi-Wan replied as he rubbed the back of his head gingerly.

"Leia told us what you did for her," Luke said. "I can't thank you enough, none of us can."

Obi-Wan smiled. "What sort of a master would I be if I let harm come to my padawan?" he asked, looking over at Leia who was still hugging her father tightly.

"Anakin Skywalker, I presume?" Piett said, approaching Anakin with a smile and an extended hand.

Anakin nodded at him.

"I'm Firmus Piett, renegade," he replied with a smile.

Anakin laughed and shook his hand. "Pleased to meet you, Firmus Piett, renegade. I understand we are to be allies."

"That remains to be seen," Piett replied, looking back at the rest of the assemblage.

“What do you think of the admiral’s proposal, Anakin?” Padmé asked.

Anakin looked at Piett, studying the man thoroughly. He sensed no deception in his mind, no malice; only honesty, integrity, and a strong sense of honor. This was a man that they could trust and depend upon.

“I say we go for it,” Anakin said at last.

Chapter 56

Chapter 56

"There's one thing you should know, Piett," Anakin said. "Ferreus is dead. I hope that won't dampen the enthusiasm of your men to mount an insurrection against the Empire."

"No, quite the contrary, I'm sure," Piett replied. "And I think I can speak for them when I say how glad I am to hear it."

"Not much of an opponent, was he?" Obi-Wan said. "I imagine you dispatched him quite easily, Anakin."

Anakin walked over to his old friend and nodded. "You tired him out though," he said with a smile. "Made my job easier."

Obi-Wan chuckled. "Well I don't know about that, but thanks for saying so."

"Thank you for saving my daughter," Anakin replied, all joking gone from his tone. "If you hadn't come when you had... I hate to think of what he'd have done to her."

"I am her master, Anakin," he said. "That is part of my commitment to her. Although I do need to have a chat with her about the expectations of a padawan. She is a little too strong willed, sort of reminds me of someone else."

Anakin laughed. There was so much he wanted to say to Obi-Wan, so much that needed to be said, but he hardly knew where to begin. Besides, it hardly seemed the time or the place for such a discussion. There were plans to be made, and it had already been a very long day. The fatigue of many sleepless nights was beginning to take its toll on him.

"Perhaps we should reconvene in the morning," Piett suggested. "You have all had a rather eventful and trying day, I dare say," he added.

"A splendid idea," Padmé said. "I'm sure we would all benefit from a good meal and some rest."

"My troops have everything under control," Piett assured them, "so rest easy tonight. I shall return in the morning."

"Sounds like a plan," Anakin said. "I'm sure I'm not the only one who's hungry enough to eat a bantha, right Luke?" he asked his son with a smile.

Luke laughed. "You got that right," he assured his father.

"Well allow me to find you some accommodations for the night," Lando spoke up. "And if I may suggest a little place I know for dinner, I'm sure they can arrange a private room for you. This is, after all, a rather special occasion."

"The first time the four of us have all been together, I'd call that rather special," Leia said, looking at her parents with a smile.

Padmé nodded, returning her daughter's smile. "Yes," she said. "That is true. Perhaps we can take an opportunity to get freshened up before we have dinner," she said, realizing that Leia would probably dearly love a chance to get changed.

"We have some very exclusive boutiques, ladies," Lando told Padmé and Leia. "If you are interested."

"Here we go," Anakin said.

Padmé turned to him. "Excuse me?" she asked, trying not to smile.

"Nothing, my love," he said. "Nothing at all. You two go on ahead while we get settled in."

"Sounds like a splendid idea," Padmé said, walking over and kissing Anakin on the cheek. "We'll meet up with you later."

Opera house-Imperial City

Palpatine stifled a yawn as he sat through yet another over dramatic aria. He did not particularly like opera, but he realized that he at least had to pretend to. It would be all over the holonet if the emperor was seen dozing off at the galactic premier of **My Mon Calamari Lover**. *As if their ballet wasn't atrocious enough*, he thought irritably as he shifted in his seat.

Finally the curtain fell to end the second act, and Palpatine breathed a sigh of relief that another segment was over. He turned to listen to the comment his aide was making when was suddenly struck by a tremor in the Force. He focused his mind on the Dark Side, bringing his mind into oneness with its dark power. *Ferreus is dead*, he thought with certainty. *That idiot has failed me yet again*.

The fact that Ferreus was dead did not concern Palpatine so much in itself, but rather that it meant he needed to find another apprentice. That was annoying. *Good help was so hard to find these days*, he thought sourly as the lights dimmed once again to announce the commencement of the third act.

Cloud City

Anakin and his family, along with Han, Chewbacca, Obi-Wan and Lando sat together enjoying a sumptuous meal in one of Cloud City's most elegant eating establishments. Lando had arranged for them to have a private room; both Anakin and Padmé were rather famous personalities in the galaxy, neither of whom was quite ready to reenter the general population as yet.

"That's a great outfit, sweetheart," Han told Leia, reaching out to take her hand on the table. "You look fantastic."

"Thanks," she said, feeling her father's eyes upon her as Han held her hand.

"What's the matter, Ani?" Padmé asked her husband. "You've hardly touched your dessert. That isn't like you."

Anakin looked at his wife, not able to shake the uneasy feeling he was beginning to get from his daughter. *She likes him*, he thought in utter shock. *She loves him! He's a smuggler! Pirate! Mercenary! And he's at least ten years older than her! What does she...*

“Ani?” Padmé asked, seeing that he was light years away.

“Yes?”

Padmé frowned, looking over at Han and Leia and then back at Anakin, realizing why he was so distracted. “You seem rather upset about something.”

“No, just tired is all,” he said, rubbing his eyes. “It’s been a long day.”

Padmé nodded, not believing him for a moment, but not wanting to get into it in their present surroundings.

“I think we could all use some rest,” Padmé said. “Perhaps it’s time we retired for the night. It’s been a long day.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” Obi-Wan said, stifling a yawn. “Some of us aren’t as young as we used to be,” he added, looking straight at Anakin.

Anakin stood up and pulled Padmé’s chair out for her. “Speak for yourself, old timer,” he said. “I’m still in my prime.”

Luke and Leia laughed at their father’s comment, enjoying the banter between him and Obi-Wan.

“Do you see the blatant disrespect I have to put up with?” Obi-Wan asked Luke and Leia with a rueful shake of his head.

“Was that disrespect when I saved your skin today?” Anakin asked him as they walked out the door.

“Well, not exactly,” Obi-Wan conceded.

Anakin merely nodded with a smile. “I’ve missed you, Obi-Wan,” he said, putting a hand on his friend’s shoulder.

Obi-Wan was surprised by Anakin’s admission, and it touched him. “It is good to have you back, old friend.”

Lando had tactfully arranged to have Leia stay in an enormous suite with her parents, while Luke, Han, Chewbacca and Obi-Wan bunked down together in much less luxurious accommodations down the corridor.

Anakin and Padmé bade goodnight to their son, Obi-Wan and the others and started heading up to their own suite. Anakin, however, noticed that Leia was hanging back, and he felt certain that he knew why. He watched at a discreet distance as she and Han shared a tender embrace, feeling every muscle in his body tense up as he did so. *Get your hands off of her you pirate*, he thought angrily to himself. It was all he could do not to reach out with the Force and push Han away from her, and send him falling ass over tea kettle into the corridor. *I’d enjoy seeing that*, he thought with dark amusement. *Maybe that would take the arrogant look from his face...*

“Anakin, are you coming?”

He turned to see Padmé standing there. Judging by the look on her face, she knew why he was lingering behind. *If I didn’t know better, I’d swear she could read my mind*, he thought as

he let her take him by the hand and down the corridor.

"Nice place," Anakin said as he and Padmé entered the suite.

"Yes, very nice," she agreed looking around. "Almost as big as our home on Coruscant."

"Yeah," he said, sitting down on one of the sofas, folding his arms over his chest.

"Coming to bed?" she asked.

"I'll be there in a moment," he said. "I just want to have a chat with our daughter."

"Anakin, do you really think that's such a good idea?" she asked.

Anakin's response was prevented by the entrance of Leia into the suite. She sensed immediately that her parents had been talking about her, and looked from one to the other.

"Something going on I should know about?" she asked.

"I just wanted to have a talk with you, Leia," Anakin said. "Come and have a seat."

"We wanted to have a talk," Padmé corrected him, realizing that her daughter's best chance of withstanding Anakin's interrogation was with her acting as a buffer.

Anakin waited until both his wife and his daughter took their seats before he spoke. Being a man of legendary bluntness, he came straight to the point. "Just what exactly is going on between you and Han Solo?"

Leia had to stop herself from letting her jaw drop open at the directness of her father. "Excuse me?" she managed to ask after a moment.

"I think you heard me," he replied, watching her closely. "What were you doing kissing him? Holding hands with him? What is going on, Leia?"

Leia frowned. "I should think that was fairly obvious," she said, starting to get annoyed with her father's attitude. "He and I have feelings for one another."

"Are you mad?" Anakin asked with a frown. "He is a smuggler! A pirate! A mercenary! He's not even close to being worthy of you! He.."

"I love him, and it's my choice," Leia interrupted, doing her best to keep her temper in check.

"Yes, of course it's your choice who you love, isn't it, Anakin?" Padmé put in, doing her best to mediate.

"I'm not so sure it should be," Anakin replied tersely, folding his arms over his chest. "If this is an example of the sort of choice she makes."

That was all it took to make Leia lose her cool. "You have no right to judge the decisions I make!" she cried.

"You're too young to know what's best for you!" Anakin countered.

"You were my age when you married my mother!" Leia returned.

"What does that have to do with anything!?"

“Don’t you think that makes you something of a hypocrite for judging me based on my age?”

“So now I’m a hypocrite!?”

“If the shoe fits,” Leia said, matching his stare with uncanny composure.

Padmé could only sit and watch the two sparring, unable to get a word in edgewise. *They are so much alike it’s scary*, she thought.

Anakin took a moment to calm himself, taking a deep breath and counting to ten silently. “Leia, you are not even twenty years old,” he said. “Do you know how old your Corellian pilot is?”

Leia shrugged, and Anakin could tell by her gesture that she knew very well.

“He’s a lot older,” Anakin continued. “A lot. It’s just not right for someone his age to be involved with someone not even out of her teenage years. Surely you can see that.”

“All I can see is that you are too narrow minded to consider that there is more to Han than you have seen,” Leia replied. “Besides, just because you are my father doesn’t give you the right to tell me who I can or cannot get involved with! I’m not a child anymore, Dad. Stop treating me like one!”

“Fine,” Anakin said, standing up suddenly. “You do what you want; it’s obvious that my opinion means nothing to you. Just don’t come crying to me when he breaks your heart, Leia; because mark my words, that’s what he’ll do if you give him the opportunity.”

“Anakin, you don’t mean that,” Padmé said to him, but he didn’t stop and headed back to the bedroom. Padmé turned to Leia.

“Your father is....very over protective,” she said. “But I’m sure you’ve noticed that about him by now.”

Leia nodded. “No kidding,” she said. “I’m not going to let him bully me into pushing Han away, Mother,” she averred.

Padmé smiled. “I don’t think he could even if he wanted to,” she said, taking Leia’s hand. “I can see how much Han means to you. And for what it’s worth, I think he’s a charming young man.”

Leia smiled. “It’s worth a lot,” she said, “thanks Mom. Do you know how nice it is to call you Mom?” she added.

Padmé nodded. “It’s very nice hearing it too,” she replied. ‘Don’t think too harshly of your father, Leia,’ she added, lifting her hand to brush an errant wisp of hair from Leia’s face. “He hasn’t really been a father for too long now, remember? He’s bound to make a few mistakes along the way. But his heart is in the right place. You know how very much he adores you and Luke.”

Leia nodded. “I know,” she said softly. “I just hope he learns to accept this.”

“He will,” Padmé assured her. “Give him time.”

“Okay,” Leia replied. “I love you, Mom,” she said, leaning over and hugging Padmé.

Padmé closed her eyes and hugged Leia back. "I love you too, Leia," she replied. "Sleep well."

Padmé found Anakin brooding in the bedroom, sitting on the bed, back against the headboard, his arms folded over his chest. He reminded her very much of the way he looked when he was a boy if something did not go his way; but she decided it would be unwise to remark upon that at this particular moment.

"She's so bloody stubborn," he grumbled as Padmé sat down at the dressing table and commenced unfastening the chignon at the nape of her neck. She glanced in the mirror at his reflection, trying not to smile.

"She is," she agreed as she pulled the pins out of her hair. "Sort of reminds me of you."

Anakin only snorted in reply. "He's too old for her," he said. "And he's a smuggler Padmé, a smuggler!"

"Was, Anakin, he *was* a smuggler," she corrected him. "According to Leia he abandoned all that to join the Alliance. Doesn't that tell you something?"

"Business was slow?" Anakin suggested acerbically.

Padmé shook her head. "You are something else, you know that? You of all people," she said, picking up her brush as she shook the curls loose.

Anakin frowned. "What is that supposed to mean?" he asked.

Padmé turned to face him. "Anakin, how do you suppose my father would have felt if he'd known that I'd married you?"

"Your father liked me as I recall," Anakin replied.

"Yes, as my Jedi protector," Padmé responded. "But had he known that we were secretly married, don't you think he'd have had some objections?"

"Such as?" he asked.

"Anakin, you were a slave," she reminded him gently. "And committed to an institution that forbade marriage. I can assure you, he would have been less than happy had he known."

"Why should the fact that I was a slave make any difference?" he asked defensively. "Was your father an elitist or something?"

Padmé couldn't help but laugh at his comment, at the irony of it. "Anakin, do you hear yourself? You are angry with my poor dead father for something he never did, while you yourself are doing that very thing to Han Solo!"

"I..." Anakin began, and then stopped as he realized he'd been trapped, yet again, in his wife's impeccable logic. "Is that what I'm doing?"

Padmé stood up and walked over to the bed. "Yes, my love," she said. 'You are.' She sat on the edge of the bed. "You have to let go a little, Anakin. Give Leia credit for knowing how to judge a person. She's a Jedi padawan, remember? If Han was a lecherous deviant don't you think she'd know it?"

"I never called him that!" Anakin protested feebly.

"No, but you were thinking it," she said with a smile, standing up.

He looked up her, narrowing his eyes. "Are you *sure* you're not Force sensitive?" he asked, unnerved yet again by her ability to read his thoughts.

Padmé laughed. "Yes, quite sure," she replied. 'I just know and understand my husband very, very well,' she told him, bending to kiss his cheek. "I'm going to get ready for bed."

"Okay," he said. 'I guess you're right,' he conceded at last, the words sticking in his throat. "Again."

She smiled on her way to the fresher. "Aren't I always?"

"No," he replied at once. "Only... ninety nine point nine percent of the time," he added.

Padmé laughed all the way to the fresher.

Anakin got off the bed and got changed for bed, his mind full of his wife's words as he did so. It would be ironic indeed if he were judging another based on their past, given his own nefarious past. And yet, wasn't that what he was doing? *No, there's more to it than just the smuggling... he's TOO DAMN OLD... and nothing Padmé says can make me change my mind about that.*

Climbing under the covers, he closed his eyes, feeling tired all of a sudden from the day's taxing events. He wondered if Palpatine had sensed the death of Ferreus yet, *if indeed the death of such pathetic excuse for a Sith was enough to...*

"Ani? You asleep? Still sulking?"

"I'm not sleeping, and I was not sulking," he replied not opening his eyes.

"I bought this today, I thought you might like it," she said.

Anakin opened his eyes, and then widened them when he saw Padmé dressed in a sheer pink nightie very much like the one she wore on their wedding night.

"Do you like it?" she asked, walking over to the bed.

"You take my breath away," he said softly, reaching a hand out to her.

Padmé smiled. "I'll take that as a yes," she said, putting her hand in his.

Chapter 57

My dear readers, tomorrow I am off to destinations south to escape the Hothlike snow and ice of Canada for a week. I'm afraid the chances of me being able to post a chapter during this time are approximately 3720 to 1, so you'll have to enjoy this last one until the week following this one. Thank you all again for the amazing support of this story! Cheers!

Chapter 57

Lord Vader... can you hear me?

*I am **not** Vader anymore; I have renounced the Dark Side.*

You may think you have, but I know you better than that. I know your lust for power is too strong for you to ignore it for long.

You don't know me at all, you never did.

I want you to come home, Lord Vader, back where you belong. You don't belong among those pathetic rebels — your strength is wasted there. Come back here and all will be forgotten.

Never.

You can have whatever you wish— if it's power you want, I will give it to you. I can give you anything you want— can the rebels you have taken up with say the same?

I have something now that you would never give me— acceptance, freedom, and love.

Love? Since when does a Sith need love? If it's your wife you want, then fine, you can have her with you if you wish. I will even help you search for a way to repair your injuries so you can be whole again.

*I **am** whole again, you twisted monster. More whole than you could ever be in a thousand life times.*

I see... well then bring your wife with you, share your life with her here, return to my right hand, my friend, and I will reward you handsomely for your loyalty.

I would rather go through the fires of Mustafar a thousand times than join you again, Sidious! The time will come when I will come back to you, but it will not be to join you, it will be to destroy you.

You cannot destroy your own kind, Vader... and we are the same, you and I, don't try to deny it.

*No! I am redeemed! I will **never** turn to the Dark Side again, do you hear me? Never!*

Who are you trying to convince, Vader? Me or yourself?

Anakin woke with a start, his heart thumping hard in his chest. He sat up in the bed, astonished to find himself bathed in sweat. *What the hell was that?* he wondered anxiously. A

dream or a conversation? Running his hands through his sweaty hair, he summoned the Force to calm his rattled nerves and slow the hammering of his heart.

“Ani?” Padmé asked sleepily, turning to him. “You okay?”

“Yes,” he lied, bending down and kissing her bare shoulder. “Go back to sleep.”

“Okay,” she murmured and was soon sound asleep again. Anakin moved over to the other side of the bed and got off. Picking up his sleep pants from where they had been tossed the previous night, he pulled them on and left room, closing the door silently behind him.

Anakin walked over to the vast picture window in the large central living area. Folding his arms, he stood staring outside as the lights of passing vehicles flickered across the ebony sky.

“Can’t sleep?” he asked as he sensed his daughter approaching him.

“No, you?” she asked as she came over to stand beside him.

“Well I *was* asleep,” he told her.

“So what happened?” she asked. “Bad dream?”

“I don’t know,” he told her truthfully. He turned and looked at her. “I think the emperor contacted me, Leia. He’s trying to get me to rejoin the Dark Side.”

Leia stood perfectly still as she felt a cold wave of anxiety filling her. “Dad, no,” she finally said. “Please tell me you told him where to go and how to get there.”

Anakin was mildly shocked by her colorful choice of words. *No doubt the influence of that pirate again*, he thought bitterly. “Well yes, in so many words,” he replied. ‘Don’t worry, Leia,’ he assured her. “I have no intention of returning to the Dark Side. Clearly Palpatine is desperate now that his brilliant protégé is dead,” he added wryly.

Leia smiled. “No doubt,” she agreed.

“At any rate,” Anakin said as he walked across the room. “I let him know in no uncertain terms that I had renounced the Dark Side, and that the only circumstances under which I would return to him was to destroy him.”

“I’m sure he wasn’t too pleased about that,” Leia commented, joining her father on the sofa.

“No, I’m sure he wasn’t,” Anakin replied. He looked at his daughter, hating the tension that had suddenly sprung up between them. “I hate this, Leia,” he said.

She frowned, knowing exactly what he meant. “I do too,” she said. “I’m sorry I called you a hypocrite.”

“And I’m sorry I treated you like a child,” he countered.

“I’m sorry I called you a stubborn, overbearing nerf herder,” Leia said.

Anakin frowned. “You didn’t,” he said.

“No, but I was thinking it,” she said with a grin.

Anakin was shocked, but then had to laugh.

"I suppose I will have to learn some modicum of tolerance," he admitted with a dramatic sigh. "And keep my opinions to myself."

"All I'm asking is that you give him a chance," Leia said. 'I know you two got off to a rough start,' she added, wincing at the understatement, "but as hard as this may be to believe, you actually have a lot in common."

Anakin snorted in response. "You're right, that is hard to believe."

"Dad," Leia said. "Come on."

"Okay, okay," Anakin relented. "I'm sorry. I will try to see beyond the smuggler to the man you so obviously believe is underneath his arrogant, cocky, sarcastic..."

"Dad!"

"Façade. Okay? Is that good enough?"

Leia sighed. "I suppose so," she said.

"Good. I'm just glad you're alright," he said, his more tone serious. 'Good old Obi-Wan,' he added with a smile. "As reliable as ever."

Leia observed her father for a moment. "He's really missed you, Dad," she told him. "I know he feels largely responsible for what happened to you."

"He shouldn't," he replied. 'I was not exactly an easy padawan to deal with. Which reminds me,' he said, turning and looking at her. "He's not pleased with you for the way you ditched him back on Hoth," he told her.

"No, I'm sure he isn't," she said.

"And neither am I, to be honest," he added. "He is your master, Leia; you need to respect him and do as his bids." *Did I just say that??* he thought incredulously.

"Yes, Dad," she said, properly contrite.

"Off the record though," Anakin continued. "I'm very impressed that you were able to ditch him. Not happy, but impressed."

Leia looked up at him with a small grin.

"How did you manage it?" he asked.

"Um, well..." Leia began, a little embarrassedly, "we were on our way to the transport, which I had no real intention of boarding, when I told him I had to go back to my quarters, that I'd forgotten something important."

Anakin frowned. "I can't imagine how he fell for that," he said. "A pretty flimsy excuse and he bought it?"

"Well, I didn't tell you what I told him I forgot," Leia said. "I told him that I forgot my... female necessities. He didn't question me at all."

Anakin burst into laughter, the thought of how embarrassed Obi-Wan must have been at that moment making him laugh even harder.

"Force that is funny," he said after a few moments. "He always was a squeamish one when it came to anything female. Did his face go all red and did he stroke his beard like mad?"

Leia nodded, giggling madly. "Yes, that's it exactly! You know him so well!"

"Well, you don't spend that much time with someone without getting to know everything about them," he said. "I used to love to tease him, poor Obi-Wan. He never knew what to expect from me next. I guess I wasn't exactly what you'd call a model pupil."

"He told me you saved his life more times than he can remember," she said. "That matters more than following the rules all the time."

Anakin nodded. "True," he said. A smile spread across his face as a memory unfolded in his mind.

"What?" Leia asked, seeing that he was amused by something.

"No, I shouldn't tell you," he said. "It would embarrass him."

"Oh come on," she said. "I told you what I said to him. It's your turn now."

Anakin laughed. "I'm definitely a bad influence on you," he decided. "But okay. During the Clone Wars, Obi-Wan and I had many adventures as you can imagine. But there was one that will always stand out in my mind as being perhaps the funniest thing I've ever seen."

Leia's eyes went as wide as saucers at this point. "Oh, tell me, tell me!"

Anakin chuckled at her enthusiasm. "We were on the planet Cato Nemoidia, deep inside the caverns. I won't go into all the details of the mission, suffice it to say we had been warned about some spores that tended to have an unusual affect on humans. As Jedi we always carried rebreathers with us in case we had to enter an area with conditions not suitable to humans, but something must have happened to his, because he was exposed to these spores. Leia, he looked like he'd downed three bottles of Kittani's Finest. When I got there he was just standing in place, but he was swaying and tottering and reeling, all the while evading and even parrying a steady stream of laser blast! And if that wasn't ridiculous enough, sometimes he'd even stop to congratulate himself on what a fine job he was doing!"

Leia laughed until she had tears streaming down her face as her father described the antics of the normally dignified Jedi Master, intoxicated and giddy from the effects of free flying spores deep within the caverns of Cato Nemoidia.

Padmé watched from the doorway as the two of them laughed together and smiled. *That's more like it*; she thought to herself and then returned to bed.

At breakfast the next morning Anakin braced himself for the arrival of Han Solo, determined not to let his obvious dislike and mistrust of the man be quite so obvious. But the moment Han walked in the door, or rather *swaggered* through the door in Anakin's eyes, he immediately began to have visions of him slipping and falling with his legs shooting up in the air, and he had to try hard not to laugh out loud at the image. He looked away in order to regain his air of quiet dignity lest Leia see that he was smirking and guess the reason why.

"Morning, uh, sir," Han said as Leia held onto his arm, no doubt directing him to her father.

“Solo,” Anakin replied simply.

Leia looked from one to the other, realizing that it was going to be a hard sell to both to get them to accept the other. She nudged Han in the ribs, earning her a sharp look from him.

“Look, I...uh, know we kind of got off to a bit of a rough start,” Han began nervously.

“You invited me to jump out of your ship while it was airborne,” Anakin remembered, enjoying the moment immensely. ‘And then you said my act of benevolence, which I believe meant saving my daughter’s life, meant jack squat to you,’ he continued. “And then I think you called me a liar when I told Luke I was his father. So if that constitutes a rough start, then yes, I’d have to agree with you.”

Han was unnerved by Anakin’s cool, composed manner, by the icy stare of his cerulean eyes, but most of all by the manner in which he had succinctly summed up their first encounter. He swallowed, realizing that this was not going to be easy. Anakin Skywalker may be Leia’s father, but he was also more intimidating than anyone Han had ever encountered. And that was saying a lot.

“Yeah, well,” Han began. ‘About that. I suppose maybe I was a little...judgmental,’ he said, forcing the words out. “Wouldn’t be the first time,” he added, trying to lighten the mood. Anakin merely watched him squirm, doing his best not to show his enjoyment openly.

“I guess what I’m trying to say is, can we start over, you and me?” Han asked. “Let bygones be bygones sorta thing?”

Anakin moved his eyes slowly from Han to his daughter, who was looking up at him with the same big brown eyes that her mother had used to her advantage on many occasions. *I did promise to try, didn’t I?* he reflected glumly. He looked back at Han.

“I suppose that is acceptable,” he said, choosing his words deliberately. ‘But mark my words, Captain,’ he added, not about to let the chance to take Han down a peg or two slip away. “I will be watching.”

Han swallowed again, trying to appear unfazed, but failing miserably. He merely nodded and then turned away. Leia looked up at her father with a smile. “Was that so hard?” she asked.

“Do you really want me to answer that?” Anakin replied.

“No,” Leia replied and then left to join Han and Luke.

Padmé, who had been watching the exchange, came over to Anakin and kissed him on the cheek.

“What did I do to deserve that?” he asked.

“You’re a good father,” she told him.

Anakin couldn’t help but smile at her comment. “Come on,” he said, taking her hand. “Let’s find a place to sit before Luke eats everything on the table.”

Chapter 58

I'm baaaaack! I hope you enjoy the chapter after such a long (and highly uncharacteristic) hiatus. :)

Chapter 58

Emperor Palpatine sat in his throne as the courtiers made their way through the room, paying their usual obsequious compliments to him. Palpatine only half listened, however, for his mind was elsewhere.

It seems that my greatest apprentice is not quite as certain of himself as he would like me to believe, he reflected smugly. He was pleased that his effort to communicate with Vader the earlier had been successful. Obviously the psychic link between master and apprentice still existed, despite Vader's claims that he had deserted the Dark Side. *I know you very well, my friend,* he thought smugly. *I know that power is what you truly love, and that you will not be able to resist it for long.* The fact that Amidala was still alive had troubled Palpatine at first, but now he realized that she could actually help him. Vader had always had a weakness where she was concerned, his physical need of her too great for him to ignore. If she were with him to see to his carnal needs, then Vader would be free to focus his energies on more important things. *It's perfect,* he thought with a smile. *Once again, Amidala, you will prove useful in my plans. And once I have your children in my grasp, the Rebel Alliance will be crushed once and for all.*

Cloud City

"So have you formulated a plan of action, sir?" Admiral Piett asked as he joined Anakin and his family at breakfast.

"I believe so," Anakin replied. "Although it is rather radical," he added.

Padmé looked at him at once. "What do you mean by radical?" she asked.

Anakin looked at her and took her hand. "Don't worry, Padmé," he assured her. 'It will be okay.' He looked at his son and then at Obi-Wan. "The emperor contacted me last night," he said.

His words sent a ripple of shock around the table.

"What do you mean, he contacted you?" Padmé asked her alarm evident in her face. "How? When?"

Anakin turned to her. "Through the Force, Padmé," he explained. "There has always been a psychic link between he and I, and I suppose it still exists."

"I don't like the sound of this," Luke said with a frown. "Why did he contact you? What does he want? Why are you still connected to him if you have renounced him and the Dark Side?"

“After twenty years, the connection is bound to be a very strong one,” Obi-Wan observed. ‘And the emperor is very strong, Luke. That he is able to connect with your father is not so surprising.’ He looked at Anakin. “The really issue is why, although I have a feeling I know why. He is trying to lure you back, isn’t he?”

Anakin nodded. “Yes, he is,” he said. “Obviously he has sensed the death of his apprentice, and is desperate to acquire a new one. Judging by the caliber of that Sith creature I destroyed, it is not easy to find a good apprentice.”

Piett smiled. “Lord Ferreus was not what you would call an effective leader,” he told Anakin. “Arrogant, ignorant, mad even; but not effective. The fact that the emperor is making the effort to draw you in again makes me think that he is quite desperate.”

“Yes, my thinking exactly,” Anakin replied. “And that will work to our advantage.”

“How?” Luke asked, not liking the direction his father’s thinking was taking.

“If Palpatine thinks that I am on the fence, so to speak,” Anakin explained. “If he believes that I am still Darth Vader, and not Anakin Skywalker, then it will enable me to get close to him, to regain his trust.”

“To what end?” Padmé asked. “I have to tell you that the thought of you having anything to do with that monster again makes me very uneasy, Anakin. He manipulated you in the past, for twenty years you have been his right hand. How can you be so sure that you will not be tempted to resume that position?”

“I have renounced the Dark Side, Padmé,” Anakin assured her. “Surely you see that it has no sway over me now. If I can get close to the emperor again, it will put me in the perfect position to destroy him. That is the entire purpose of this ruse, to destroy the Sith once and for all.”

“There is something you must consider, Anakin,” Obi-Wan spoke up. “Perhaps he is setting you up, just as you plan to do to him. Perhaps he is planning to use you to get to Luke and Leia.”

“I intend on bringing Luke and Leia to him,” Anakin replied. “As well as you.”

“You can’t be serious!” Padmé cried. “All these years Luke and Leia were apart in order to keep them from the emperor, and now you are going to hand them over to him? Why would you even consider such a thing?”

“Because we will help him destroy Palpatine,” Leia said, starting to see her father’s plan. “It’s an ambush, a trap. It’s brilliant,” she concluded, looking at her father with pride.

“If it works,” Han grumbled. “If he knows you’re setting him up, he will have a whole squadron of storm troopers standing by ready to wipe out the lot of you.”

Anakin had to force himself to refrain from answering Han’s comment in the manner which he wished. *You did promise to try to accept him*, he reminded himself, glancing at Leia. Judging by the look on her face she was hoping that he would remember his promise as well.

“That is true,” Anakin conceded at last. “But I know him well, Captain Solo. He may think that he can read my mind, but what he doesn’t know is that I have been effectively shielding

my mind from him for years. I can read him better than he can read me. I will know if he is planning something. So you see, the advantage is mine.”

“I don’t like this,” Padmé said, still not convinced that Anakin could resist the temptation such a situation would create for him.

“There is no other way,” Anakin said at last. ‘I wish I could count on the support of my family, but it is beginning to look doubtful. If I have to do this on my own, then so be it. I *will* destroy Palpatine; it is my destiny to do so. I suppose it is up to all of you to decide whether or not you will support me in this.’ He looked up at Piett. “I need you to brief me on the *Executor*,” he said. “If I am to assume command, even in appearance, I have to know my crew and my ship.”

Piett nodded. “Of course, sir. We can take a tour right now if you wish.”

Anakin stood up. “I do wish it,” he said. “Let’s get to it.”

Padmé knew that Anakin was upset, that he was disappointed. But she could not pretend to be happy about a situation that frightened her to death. She watched him leave with Piett and then turned to Luke and Leia.

“I hope he knows what he’s doing,” Luke said quietly.

Leia nodded. “He does,” she said. ‘But he needs our support to make this work. I for one am going to give him mine,’ she averred. “I have every confidence in him.”

“So do I,” Padmé, agreed, standing up. “I think he needs to know it, though.” With that she left the room and entered the corridor.

“Anakin! Wait!” she called as she ran down the hallway after Anakin and Piett.

Anakin heard his wife calling him, and turned around to see her running towards him.

“I’ll catch up to you,” he told Piett.

“Very good sir,” Piett replied. “I’ll wait for you on docking bay three two four.”

Anakin nodded his understanding as he watched Padmé approach him. Piett continued on his way, leaving the two of them alone.

“Anakin, don’t walk away angry,” she said when she reached him. “We need to talk about this.”

“I’m not angry,” he replied, folding his arms over his chest.

Padmé met his eyes, not convinced for a moment that he was being honest with her.

“Yes you are,” she challenged him. “I can see it in your eyes, in the set of your jaw, the way you are...”

“Alright, alright,” he conceded. “So I’m angry. Can you blame me? I thought you trusted me, Padmé. Apparently I was wrong.”

“What makes you think I don’t trust you?” she demanded, hands on her hips.

"It's obvious that you don't," Anakin retorted. "Why else would you have such doubts about this plan? You think I'm going back to the Dark Side, don't you?"

"Anakin!" she cried. "I think no such thing! I can't believe you'd even think that for a moment! I have total faith in you!"

Anakin looked at her for a moment, his anger giving way to confusion.

"Then why won't you support me in this?" he asked her.

Padmé could see the change in his demeanor and stepped closer to him. "I'm afraid, Ani," she told him, taking his face in her hands. "I despise Palpatine for what he did to you, to us. The thought of you getting involved with him again terrifies me. I couldn't bear to have something happen to you, Ani. I couldn't stand to lose you again."

Anakin drew her close to him, wrapping his arms around her waist. "Nothing is going to happen, Padmé. The darkness is gone, I know it. Palpatine will have no power over me, I swear to you. I know him well, better than he realizes. I've been watching him for twenty years, and I know exactly what to do in order to regain his trust. Once I've done that, I will destroy him. The Empire won't stand a chance against the Alliance, especially with the flagship of the Imperial fleet on its side." He stopped for a moment and took her face in his hands. "You won't lose me, Padmé," he told her softly. "Never again. I promise you."

Padmé smiled, his words reassuring her. "I believe you, Anakin," she told him, stroking his face gently. "I believe *in* you."

"That's all I ask," he replied. "Because without you, my existence is an empty one, Padmé."

Padmé was moved by his words, and brought his face down to hers to kiss him. Anakin wrapped his arms around her and held her close, returning her kiss, not caring who saw them.

"Don't you two *ever* stop?"

Anakin and Padmé broke their kiss and looked up to see their children standing in the corridor. That couldn't help but laugh at their son's comment.

"Well if we did, you two certainly wouldn't be around," Anakin replied with a grin.

"Dad!" Leia cried. "Way too much information!"

"Such impudent children," Padmé said with a smile and a shake of her head.

"Indeed," Anakin agreed, folding his arms over his chest. "Pity they're too old for a good old-fashioned spanking."

Luke and Leia looked at one another in shock as their parents laughed again.

"Come on," Anakin said at last. "Piett is waiting for us."

"For us?" Luke asked. "You mean all four of us?"

Anakin nodded. "Of course," he replied. "This family has spent far too long apart. It's time we stuck together, don't you think?"

Leia smiled. "I couldn't agree more," she said. "Lead the way, Dad."

Chapter 59

Chapter 59

“Something on your mind? Or do you always just stare at people that way?”

Obi-Wan smiled at the young pilot’s obvious attempts to hide his uneasiness. “I was wondering the same thing about you, Captain Solo,” he replied. “You seem rather troubled for some reason.”

“Me?” Han retorted with a smirk. “Nothing troubling me, old man.”

Obi-Wan nodded. “I see,” he said, not believing Han for a moment. “I couldn’t help but notice that you and Princess Leia’s father are rather....adversarial.”

Han shrugged; hating the fact that Obi-Wan was able to see right through his attempts to be indifferent. “So?” he said. “He’s not exactly an easy guy to get along with.”

“No, he isn’t,” Obi-Wan agreed. “I know that better than anyone. I suppose, though, the fact that he is rather intimidating makes things somewhat more problematic for someone wishing to court his daughter.”

Han lowered his brows, staring at the old Jedi. “Do you ever just get to the point, Kenobi? Or are you always so long winded?”

Obi-Wan chuckled. “Some might call it tactfulness,” he commented. “But if you wish me to be blunt, I shall be happy to do so. It’s obvious that you have feelings for Leia Skywalker, and the fact that you and her father can’t get along is a problem.”

“And?” Han said, not trying to deny a word Kenobi had said.

“And, I was wondering if you needed some advice from someone who knows Anakin Skywalker better than most,” Kenobi replied. “That is, if you wish to put an end to the enmity between you and him.”

Han continued to scowl at Obi-Wan, not wanting to admit that he could definitely use some advice. He had never needed anything from anybody, and had prided himself on being completely independent for most of his life. But then, he had never been in love before. That had changed everything.

Obi-Wan had seen within moments of meeting him that Han Solo was not an easy man to read; and yet, he knew that he’d captured Han’s interest. It was obvious that Solo was crazy about Leia Skywalker; and it was equally obvious that he was clueless how to make such a relationship work. The fact that Leia’s father was the Chosen One, the Hero with no Fear, the greatest Jedi of them all... well that just presented a complication Han didn’t need. Anakin Skywalker was extremely protective of his daughter, and was not a man to be trifled with. Han Solo was an incredibly stubborn man, who hated to rely on anyone for anything. Secretly Obi-Wan found the entire situation rather amusing; but he liked the young pilot, and knew

that he was the only one who could give Han the advice he needed. *If only he weren't too proud to take it*, he reflected.

"Suppose I do," Han replied at last. "It's pretty clear that he thinks that I'm not good enough for his little girl. I doubt any man would be," he grumbled.

"You're right about that," Kenobi replied. "But you have to remember that Leia is very strong willed, she is very much like her father in that respect."

"Yeah, no kidding," Han snorted. "What's your point?"

"My point is if Leia reciprocates your feelings, she will not let her father interfere," Kenobi replied. "She will do everything she can to make the two of you get along, as impossible as that seems right now."

"So what are you suggesting?" Han asked. "How do I get him to back off?"

Obi-Wan smiled. *You don't*, he reflected. "Well, the way I see it, Anakin won't back off, not where his daughter is concerned. So it's up to you to make him like you."

"Yeah, right," Han replied. "Like that'll ever happen in a thousand years."

Obi-Wan laughed. "He's not as bad as you think, Han. In fact, you and he have a lot in common, believe it or not."

"I don't believe it," Han replied.

"No, I didn't think you would," Obi-Wan returned. "But you do. You're both incredibly stubborn, proud to a fault, independent, cocky..."

"Hey," Han protested.

"Are you going to let me finish?" Kenobi asked patiently.

Han sighed loudly. "Yeah, go ahead."

"Thank you," Obi-Wan said. "You may not be aware of it, but Anakin Skywalker was known as the greatest pilot in the galaxy at one time. And if I were a betting man, I'd wager he still is. He is a genius of engineering, can build or fix anything... sound like someone you know?"

Han rubbed his chin thoughtfully, hating to admit that the old man was right. "Yeah, I suppose it does," He admitted. "So what? What difference does any of that make if he thinks I'm not good enough for Leia?"

Obi-Wan sighed. "I'm afraid you'll have to figure that out for yourself, Han. You're a resourceful young man, I'm sure you'll think of something."

Han frowned as the old Jedi walked away. *Damn you Kenobi*, he thought to himself. *Why do you always have to be right?*

Star Destroyer Executor

Upon arriving at the enormous docking bay of the *Executor*, Anakin, Padmé and their children accompanied Admiral Piett to a large conference room where many of the senior

officers of the mighty vessel were assembled. All eyes turned and watched as they entered the room, all talking stopped as they took a seat at the head of the large conference table.

“Gentlemen, please sit down,” Piett said to his fellow officers. The men sat down at once, as murmurs of curiosity went around the room as one by one they began to realize who it was sitting in their midst. Piett waited until the room was quiet again before he spoke again.

“Judging by the look on the faces of many of you, I don’t need to introduce at least one of our guests,” he began. “If you are old enough to remember the Clone Wars, which I daresay all of you are, you will no doubt remember the Hero with No Fear, the great Anakin Skywalker.”

“How is this possible?” one captain spoke up. “I thought you were killed in the purges along with the rest of the Jedi.”

Anakin looked at his wife and then back at the man asking the question. “No, I was not,” he replied, the difficulty of what he needed to say suddenly hitting him. “Anakin Skywalker ceased to exist, but not in the manner you think. Twenty years ago he was transformed into the monster you all knew as Darth Vader.”

Expressions of shock and disbelief were heard from all quarters as the men did their best to comprehend what they had just been told. Padmé could see how difficult this was for Anakin, and reached over and took his hand. He looked at her with a smile, grateful for her support.

“You mean to tell us that you are Darth Vader?” another officer asked. “How is that possible? Darth Vader was a cyborg, not a man.”

“Darth Vader was the result of a number of tragic, horrific circumstances,” Leia spoke up. ‘Physically, psychologically, spiritually— he was the wreckage of a once good man that had been corrupted by the emperor, used and destroyed in order for Palpatine to create this Empire.’ She looked at her father. “That man has returned, and is seated here with you today. He is Anakin Skywalker once again, in every possible way.”

“Aren’t you Princess Leia Organa of Alderaan?” one of the men asked. “Why are you involved in all of this?”

“Vader saved her from the Death Star, remember?” another responded.

“That’s right,” a third spoke up, looking at Leia. “He committed treason to get you off of that space station and helped the Rebel Alliance in its destruction.”

Leia nodded. “Yes, that’s right,” she said. She turned to Luke. “My brother Luke here is the one who destroyed it thanks to the information that Darth Vader provided us with.”

“I’m afraid I’m very confused by all this,” one officer spoke up. “Darth Vader defected? Why? What was your motivation?”

“My family was my motivation,” Anakin said at last. He turned and looked at his children who were seated beside him. “Princess Leia Organa is my daughter, and Luke Skywalker is my son.”

The reaction was immediate to this disclosure. *Now it makes sense*, they all thought. *Now it all fits together.*

“And you, milady, are Senator Amidala, one time queen of Naboo, are you not?” one officer asked.

Padmé nodded. “Yes,” she replied. “I am Anakin’s wife, the mother of his children.”

Piett watched as the expression on the faces of his men changed from confusion, to wonder, to astonishment all in short order. Clearly they respected Anakin Skywalker and his family; but would that be enough to garner their support in Anakin’s plan?

“Gentlemen,” Piett spoke up to gain their attention once again. ‘No doubt you are all wondering what the reason is behind the arrival of our most remarkable guests. It is a simple one.’ He turned to look at Anakin. “Anakin Skywalker has freed us from the tyranny of the monstrous Ferreus. The Dark Lord we all grew to despise is dead.”

The response of the officers was quite startling in its enthusiasm at this news. Obviously Ferreus had been truly hated by his men, his death cause for celebration.

Piett held up his hand to get the room quiet once again. “There is more, my friends. The Skywalker family has allied itself to us in our cause to fight the Empire. With their help, we can form a coalition with the Rebel Alliance, join our strength to theirs.”

“How do you expect the Alliance to accept us as allies?” one officer spoke up. “This is the flag ship of the fleet, Piett. The rebels won’t trust us.”

Other officers agreed, and voiced this sentiment.

“I am one of the leaders of the Alliance,” Leia spoke up. “I will speak to the other leaders; help them to see how this coalition would be the perfect way to end the conflict that has ripped the galaxy apart for the past twenty years.”

“Our father has already demonstrated his trustworthiness when he helped the Alliance destroy the Death Star,” Luke spoke up at this point. “When he prevented the destruction of Alderaan and saved my sister from certain execution at the hands of Tarkin. Our mother was instrumental in the very creation of the Rebel Alliance, back when the Republic was in its last days. The Alliance would be foolish not to accept your help in their fight against the Empire; not with my father commanding this ship.”

“Is that what the big plan is?” one officer spoke up. “To have you command this ship?” he asked Anakin.

Anakin nodded. “The emperor needs a new apprentice,” he replied. “He has already contacted me and asked me to return to his service. I will do so, or so I will lead him to believe.”

“The emperor does not know that this ship has mutinied,” Piett reminded his officers. “So if Darth Vader takes command of it, he will not suspect that anything is amiss. Only it won’t be Darth Vader in command, it will be Anakin Skywalker.”

“I’m afraid you’ve lost me,” an officer said. “Darth Vader and Anakin Skywalker are the same person, isn’t that what you just told us?”

“They are and they aren’t,” Anakin replied. “Think of it as opposite sides of a coin; Darth Vader is the dark manifestation of Anakin Skywalker. It was Darth Vader who helped Palpatine form the Empire, who committed countless unspeakable acts of cruelty over the

past twenty years. He was the servant of the emperor and he is the one the emperor desperately needs at his side again.”

“So let me see if I understand this,” the same officer replied. “You will....pretend to be Vader? Is that what you are saying?”

Anakin nodded. “Yes,” he said. “I am. Palpatine needs Vader, he needs him so desperately that he is swallowing his pride and almost begging him to come back. I will use this desperation to my advantage, to regain his trust, all the while planning to destroy him and the Empire.”

“With this ship and the support of the Rebel Alliance, the plan cannot fail,” Piett spoke up. “Add to that the fact that we will have the only remaining Jedi in the galaxy on our side, and our victory becomes a veritable certainty, gentlemen.”

The officers looked at one another, discussing all that they had just heard among themselves. Anakin watched them, trying to get a sense of what was in their hearts and in their minds. They were excited, that much was clear. But were they convinced? He wasn’t so sure.

“Perhaps we need to let you discuss this among yourselves,” Padmé suggested. “If Anakin is to lead you, there can be no room for doubt in your minds.”

“We would appreciate that opportunity, milady,” one officer replied. “This is all quite startling and unexpected.”

“I’m sure it is,” Padmé responded. “But you men are committed to mutiny; surely you can see that such a radical move call for some rather activist measures.”

“A point well made, milady,” Piett said. “And I can assure you that everyone in this room is one hundred percent in favor of this course of action.”

“Then we shall leave the decision to you,” Anakin said, standing up. ‘I think you men need me as much as I need you,’ he added. He turned to his family. “Let’s go,” he said.

Piett watched them leave, and then returned his attention back to the other officers. “Well then,” he said. “Let’s get down to it.”

Chapter 60

Chapter 60

Super Star Destroyer Executor

“Well,” Piett said as the chatter finally wound down amidst the officers. “Obviously this is quite an unprecedented series of events. But I believe that things happen for a reason. Anakin Skywalker’s path has crossed ours at this particular point in time for a reason; he is the leader we need in order to turn the tide in our favor.”

“But what of the Rebellion?” Captain Riley asked. “If they find out that Skywalker was Darth Vader not so long ago, they will want nothing to do with any of this. I don’t need to remind anyone of the ruthless manner in which Vader pursued the Rebellion over the past twenty years. I don’t think we can simply assume that the name of Skywalker will be enough to gain their support, no matter who he was twenty years ago.”

“I agree,” Captain Stronick spoke up. “The Rebellion would not have survived this long without strong, intelligent leaders. They are very cautious, very shrewd.”

“But you are forgetting about the influence of Skywalker’s family,” Lieutenant Vandergraaff spoke up. “Padmé Amidala has been held in high esteem for many years, and was a staunch supporter of the Republic and a founder of the Rebellion. Their children have both been heroes in the Rebellion. That cannot be ignored.”

“No, it cannot,” Piett spoke up. “The bottom line is, the Alliance will not defeat the Empire so long as they continue the sort of guerilla warfare they have been waging for the past two decades, the Empire is simply too strong. If they can see that, if they are willing to admit that they need our help, then perhaps they will accept it. I think Anakin Skywalker is the key, my friends. He was called the Hero with No Fear during the Clone Wars, and is a man of singular abilities. He alone has the power to turn the tide of this conflict. We need him, gentlemen. That is the bottom line.”

Murmurs went around the table, as each of the men considered Piett’s words. None could deny the potential that an alliance with the Skywalker family represented. None could deny that Anakin Skywalker’s vision and brilliance were unparalleled in the galaxy.

“Assuming that we are willing to go along with Skywalker’s plan,” Stronick spoke up. “What happens if the Alliance wants nothing to do with us? With him? What then, Admiral?”

Piett could see that he was making headway with the men, and it gave him hope. “I think we ought to cross that bridge when we get to it, Captain,” he replied. “And allow Leia Skywalker to speak to her comrades in the Alliance. She is a gifted young woman, and if anyone can make the Alliance see reason, it is her.”

The officers looked at one another, satisfied for the moment. “Very well,” Riley spoke up. “We will allow her to try. I don’t think any of us can deny the impact that Anakin Skywalker can have on the future of all of us sitting here.”

"Does that mean that you are willing to follow him?" Piett asked. "And accept him as the commander of this ship?"

"Yes," Riley replied. "No one here would be fool enough to deny Skywalker's abilities. And if you are convinced of his trustworthiness, then that is good enough for me."

"And me," spoke up several others. It soon became obvious that the men unanimously trusted Piett's opinion and accepted Anakin as their leader. Their only fears lie in the decisions of the Rebel Alliance.

"It's settled then," Piett said, pleased that the men were wise enough to realize that Skywalker was the logical choice to lead their crusade. "I shall go to Skywalker and let him know what we've decided."

Anakin had been quiet and contemplative as they headed back to Bespin. Being on board a star destroyer again had been more unnerving than he had anticipated. The fact that he had helped design the enormous vessel, and that it very likely would have been his to command made it more so. *That was another life time*, he reflected. *I can hardly fathom living that way now*, he realized, thinking of his family. He could scarcely imagine how he had existed so long without them in his life.

Leia had noted her father's pensive mood, and waited for an opportune moment to approach him. That opportunity came when they were back in their suite in the cloud city. She found Anakin standing at the large picture window, watching twilight's descent upon the city.

"Where's Mother?"

Anakin turned and looked at his daughter. "She's talking to your grandmother," he told her. "She should be back soon."

Leia nodded. "And Luke is still training with Obi-Wan?"

"Yes I believe so," Anakin replied. "Something I can help you with?"

"I was going to ask you the same thing," Leia replied with a smile. "You okay, Dad?"

Anakin smiled and touched her face gently. "Yes," he said. "I'm just thinking about how much my life has changed in the past few months. Being on a star destroyer again was rather...surreal."

Leia nodded. "I'm sure," she replied.

"If I had continued to live as Darth Vader, that ship would have been mine," he told her. "Rather ironic, isn't it?"

"Yes, very much so," she replied. "But it's perfect, though, don't you think?"

"Well, it certainly will strengthen our cause," he agreed. He smiled. "Part of me would very much like to surprise those rebel leaders by just showing up on their doorstep in the *Executor*. Can you imagine the look on Dodonna's face if it just appeared out of hyperspace?"

Leia laughed. "I don't think his heart could take it," she replied.

"Perhaps not," Anakin replied. "What do you plan on telling them?"

"I haven't figured that out yet," she admitted. "I was hoping you'd have an idea."

"I'm not the diplomat of the family, Leia," he reminded her. "That's your mother's area of expertise, not mine."

Leia nodded. "That's true," she replied. "Perhaps she and I can formulate a plan together that the rebel leaders will accept."

"Perhaps it would be a good idea to bring one of Piett's men with you," Anakin suggested. "As a gesture of goodwill."

"That's a great idea," Leia responded with a smile. "And you said you weren't a diplomat."

Anakin chuckled. "I'm not," he said. "But I've been around long enough to have a good idea once in a while."

"Please," Leia replied. "You're a brilliant man, Dad, the most amazing man I know."

Anakin was taken aback by his daughter's words, her praise leaving him speechless for a moment. "I don't know what to say to something like that," he admitted. "Thank you, Leia. You know how much your opinion means to me."

Leia nodded. "I do," she replied. "That's why I wish you would learn to like Han."

Anakin groaned inwardly. "Leia, do we have to go there right now?" he asked.

"No, we don't have to," she replied. "But you know I'm every bit as stubborn as you are, Daddy."

Anakin laughed. "Yes, so I've noticed," he said. "It scares me."

Leia laughed. "Just promise me you won't scare Han when you see him again."

Anakin raised his eyebrows. "I *scare* him?" he asked innocently. "Aren't you exaggerating just a little?"

"You know very well what I'm talking about," she replied. "I witnessed that little exchange you had at breakfast, remember? What was it you said to him? *Mark my words, Captain... I will be watching*. Don't you think that's maybe just a little bit... intimidating?"

Anakin merely smiled. "You think so?"

Leia rolled her eyes. "Uh, yeah, I do," she replied. "Just try not to scare him, okay? Please? For me?"

That is so unfair, he thought as she looked up at him with her big brown eyes. *How am I supposed to refuse her when she looks at me like that?*

"I suppose so," he said at last. "But it's not my fault if he's faint of heart."

Leia was about to reply but she saw the twinkle in her father's eyes, and realized that he was teasing her. "You're terrible," she said, shaking her head.

Anakin laughed. "Yes, I know," he said. He put an arm around her shoulders. "You're mother's been telling me that for years."

“Telling you what?” Padmé asked as she entered the room.

Leia and Anakin turned to her. “Dad was just teasing me,” Leia told her mother. “Does he ever do that to you?”

Padmé’s eyes widened and she looked at Anakin. “Does he ever tease me?” she asked, trying to control her laughter. “You might say so, yes.”

Anakin laughed. “I only do so as a sign of deepest affection,” he told them both.

Leia and Padmé looked at one another. “Oh, is *that* it,” Leia quipped rolling her eyes.

Padmé laughed. “Any word from Piett?” she asked Anakin.

Anakin shook his head. “No, not yet,” he said. ‘I don’t have a good feeling about this,’ he added. “The longer we wait, the smaller the likelihood that this plan of mine will work.”

“It will work, Ani,” Padmé said, taking his hand. “They are not fools. They will realize that you are their only hope of making this insurrection go anywhere.”

“I agree,” Leia said. ‘But I think we need to start thinking about what we’re going to say to Mon Mothma and the others,’ she added. “They will be the really difficult ones to convince.”

“Yes, no doubt of that,” Anakin said. ‘I will let the two diplomats of the family deal with them,’ he said. “I’m going to take a walk to clear my mind.”

“You’re going to contact Piett, aren’t you?” Padmé asked as he walked away from them.

“Yes,” he said without turning back.

Padmé smiled. “We’ll be here,” she called to him.

Leia smiled too, loving the closeness her parents so obviously shared.

“Well now,” Padmé said, turning back to Leia. “Looks like we have some work to do, don’t we?”

Leia nodded. “Yes, we sure do. Let’s get started.”

As Anakin was walking through the corridors of Cloud City, he happened upon Han Solo, who was engaged in a rather animated conversation with Lando Calrissian. Realizing that Han had not yet noticed his presence, Anakin hung back in order to listen to the conversation undetected.

“Han, I just don’t have that kind of money,” Calrissian was saying. “Most of my assets are tied up in property, or stocks. Putting together an amount that big would be next to impossible in the short time you’re asking.”

“Lando, you owe me,” Han retorted angrily. ‘You sold me and Leia out to those imperial bastards,’ he reminded his friend. “You stood by while they tortured me, and forced Leia to watch!”

“Do you think I had a choice?” Lando returned hotly. “You don’t just say no to a squadron of stormtroopers and a Sith Lord! They arrived before you, they knew you were coming! What was I supposed to do? If I’d refused to cooperate they would have just killed me and done what they wanted anyway. I know you’re mad, Han, but you must be able to see that.”

Han could see it, but that didn't make his friend's betrayal any easier. Not only that, Jabba the Hutt had an enormous bounty on his head, a fact that Han could not ignore. Jabba was not someone who tolerated betrayal; his ruthlessness was legendary, particularly when it came to matters of a monetary nature.

"Yeah, I see it," Han replied at last. "You're too busy looking after your own ass to give a shit about saving a friend's. That's okay, Lando. I'm sure Jabba will understand when I tell him I don't have the money I owe him. You know how forgiving and compassionate the Hutts are." With that Han strode away from his friend, muttering a number of curses under his breath.

Anakin was startled by the mention of the notorious Hutts. *So Solo owes Jabba money*, he thought, his opinion of the young pilot dropping several more notches. *A smuggler and a fool, very impressive*. But then the image of his daughter's face came to his mind as she implored him to give Han a fair chance, to try to accept him for her sake. Despite what his own opinion of Solo was, Anakin knew that Leia cared very deeply for the man. The thought of Leia being afraid for the man she loved was too much for Anakin to bear. *So this is what it's like to be a father*, he reflected as he followed Han, *wrapped around my daughter's little finger*.

Chapter 61

Chapter 61

“Solo!”

Han stopped in his tracks at the sound of Anakin’s voice. *Oh shit...* he thought. *Did he just hear that??*

Han turned to face Anakin, doing his utmost to hide his trepidation.

“You wanted to talk to me?” he asked.

Anakin nodded, focusing on his daughter to fight the mistrust he felt for this man. “I do,” he replied.

“What about?” Han asked. “Or do I need to ask?”

Anakin scowled his dislike for the young pilot impossible to hide. “You really are something, Solo,” he said. “Is there ever a time when you are not rude or arrogant? For the life of me I can’t see what my daughter sees in you.”

“Yeah, well I feel the same way about you,” Han retorted before his mind had a chance to filter his mouth.

Anakin’s anger rose and he took a step closer to Han. “You have some nerve,” he growled. “Speaking to me this way and expecting that I will ever accept you as a suitor for my daughter. I have half a mind to...”

“Go ahead,” Han urged him, “I dare you. See if Leia ever speaks to you again if you do.”

“What is going on between you two!?”

Both men turned to see none other than Leia standing before them. Judging by the anger in her eyes, she had heard most of the heated exchange.

“Why don’t you ask your father,” Han suggested angrily. “He’s the one who started it.”

“You lying bastard,” Anakin replied hotly. ‘All I said was I wanted to talk to him,’ he told Leia. “He is the one who started making accusations.”

“So calling me arrogant and rude were ways of making friends? Is that it?” Han countered.

“Both adjectives were completely justified,” Anakin retorted. “In fact, there are few more I could use, would you like to hear them?”

“Stop it!” Leia cried, stepping between the two of them before they came to blows. ‘Please, just stop it!’ She turned to her father. “Admiral Pielt is here looking for you,” she said. “So I’m afraid this little tête-à-tête will have to be postponed until later.”

Anakin nodded his understanding, not taking his eyes off of Han for a moment.

“Are you coming?” he asked Leia.

“I’ll be right there,” she said, turning to Han.

Anakin looked back up at Han, his eyes like daggers. “This isn’t over, Solo,” he said.

Han did not reply, the look in Anakin’s eyes completely unnerving him. He managed to appear unaffected, however, and watched as Anakin walked away.

“Now,” Leia said, hands on her hips. “Tell me what *really* happened.”

Han’s eyes widened in surprise. “What do you mean by that?” he demanded.

“I mean I know you well enough to see when you are lying,” she replied coolly. “You obviously did something to set my father off.”

“Not hard to do, you know,” he countered. “Especially for me.”

“He is trying to accept you, Han,” she replied. “But you are not making it easy if you act this way. Tell me what happened. All of it.”

Han exhaled loudly, folding his arms over his chest.

“He was following me,” Han began. “And I think he was listening in on a conversation I had with Lando.”

“What about?” Leia asked.

“Does that matter?” Han replied.

Leia looked at him closely. “Yes, I think it does,” she said. “Just tell me.”

“I don’t think I like this...interrogation, sweetheart,” Han replied angrily. “You’re starting to sound like your old man.”

Leia did not reply, for Han’s comment, or rather the intent of it, cut her deeply. “Fine,” she said at last. “If you don’t want to tell me what happened, I guess we have nothing to discuss.”

“I guess so,” Han replied, not giving in to her manipulation.

She looked up at him. “I thought there was something between us, Han,” she said, genuinely saddened. “I guess I was wrong.” She turned and walked away, leaving Han feeling frustrated and ashamed.

Leia walked quickly in order to catch up to her father, forcing herself not to think about Han, not to let the tears that were threatening to spill out of her eyes do so. *Dad was right, she thought bitterly. Han is nothing but an arrogant scoundrel. I was a fool to think he cared about me.*

Leia reached the suite where she had left Admiral Piett with her mother, noticing that her father and brother were now present as well. Anakin looked up at her and knew at once that she was upset. *Damn you, Solo, he thought angrily. You’ll pay for this.*

“Admiral Piett has some good news,” Anakin told her as she took a seat beside Padmé.

Leia looked at Admiral Piett expectantly. “They’ve agreed to follow my father?” she asked.

Piett nodded. "Yes they have," he told her.

"How did you manage to convince them?" Luke asked.

"It wasn't that difficult, actually," Piett replied. "The name of Anakin Skywalker is well known and synonymous with honour and glory. Their real reservations arise from the reaction the Rebel Alliance will have to all of this."

"That is natural," Padmé replied. "It is never easy to accept that an enemy can become an ally."

"Did you have any luck talking to them?" Anakin asked her.

Padmé turned to him. "Leia spoke to General Dodonna," she replied. "We thought perhaps revealing that I am alive was too much to reveal at this point."

"Probably a wise precaution," Anakin replied. 'So what did you tell them?' he asked his daughter next. "How did it go?"

"I told them that we had captured an enemy vessel," Leia replied with a smile. "That's not entirely untrue."

Anakin grinned. "No, not entirely. And a brilliant move as well. No doubt they were pleased to hear it."

Leia nodded. "Yes, very pleased," she replied. "Of course, I didn't tell them that the ship was a super star destroyer," she added with a smile.

"I'd give a thousand credits to see General Dodonna's face when the *Executor* appears," Luke said with a grin.

"He may think it's a trap," Piett pointed out. "Have you considered that?"

"Yes, we have," Padmé said. 'That is why the first face they will see will be a friendly one, one that they trust.' He turned and looked at Luke. "And who better than the hero of the Battle of Yavin?" she asked, smiling at her son.

"I couldn't agree more," Anakin said, looking at Luke proudly. "Seeing you will put to rest any fears that they have been tricked."

Piett nodded. "I agree," he said. 'In fact, I...' "he stopped as the door chime was heard." Perfect timing,' he said with a smile as he stood up and headed for the door. "Come in, Lieutenant."

The Skywalkers watched as Piett returned to the sitting room with a young officer.

"May I present Lieutenant Danison Keller," Piett said as the young man bowed politely. "Keller, this is Anakin Skywalker, Senator Padmé Amidala Skywalker." Anakin and Padmé stood up to shake hands with the young man.

"It is an honour to meet you both," Keller told them. 'My father used to tell me stories about the Clone Wars when I was a boy, sir,' he said, addressing Anakin. "You were always something of a hero of mine."

Anakin smiled, liking the young man immediately. "Thank you," he replied. "These are our children," he said, turning to Luke and Leia. "My son, Luke, my daughter, Leia."

"A pleasure to meet you," Keller said, shaking hands with Luke first and then Leia. "Excuse me, but aren't you Princess Leia Organa? Of Alderaan?"

Leia nodded. "Yes, but I'm first and foremost the daughter of Anakin and Padmé Skywalker."

"I meant no disrespect, milady," he said at once. "It's just that Alderaan is my home world," he explained with a smile.

Anakin couldn't help but smile at this revelation, as well as the reaction it garnered from his daughter. The fact that the young man was tall and broad had blond wavy hair and green eyes didn't hurt either. *You're all but forgotten, Solo*, he thought with satisfaction. *Now that someone more worthy has entered the picture.*

"I took the liberty of selecting Keller here to act as a liaison between the *Executor* and the rebel leaders," Piett explained as they all took their seats again. "I thought it might help prove our trustworthiness to them."

"An excellent idea," Anakin said approvingly.

"The rebel leaders will be expecting us to rendezvous with them within the next forty-eight hours," Leia went on to explain. "Is that enough time for you to ready your men, Admiral?"

"My men are ready now, Princess," Piett assured her. "And anxious for this to get underway. We can leave whenever you wish."

Anakin nodded. "We're all anxious, Piett," he said. "The sooner we get negotiations with the Alliance started, the better as far as I'm concerned."

"Then why don't we plan to leave first thing in the morning?" suggested Padmé.

"I have the coordinates of the rebel fleet," Leia told the Imperial officers, looking at Keller. "They're not that far away, actually."

"Splendid," Piett replied. "Then we shall leave first thing," he added, standing up. Keller joined him.

"Why don't the two of you join us for dinner?" Anakin suggested. "We still have a lot to talk about."

Piett looked at Keller. "I thank you sir," he said. "We'd be delighted."

Anakin smiled. He had noticed the way Leia was looking at the handsome young officer, and was more than anxious to give the two of them an opportunity to spend more time together. *Han Solo will be nothing but a bad memory*, he thought, his smile increasing. *Leia will not even remember his name in a few weeks if this goes the way I hope.*

Padmé watched her husband, knowing him well enough to know that the wheels were turning inside his mind. And she was certain she knew exactly what it was that he was plotting. *Stay out of this, Ani*, she warned him silently. *Don't you start messing things up for Leia!*

Anakin turned to his wife and looked at her innocently, and merely smiled. “Shall we go to dinner?” he said, standing up and holding his hand out to her.

Padmé stood up and looked at him. “Be careful,” she said simply and walked ahead of him.

Anakin only smiled in response.

Chapter 62

Chapter 62

Luke made his way through the crowded corridors of Cloud City with a sense of urgency. It was no secret that his father had little use for Han Solo. Now, however, Anakin seemed to be planning on replacing the young pilot as Leia's suitor, and that didn't sit well with Luke. Yes, Han Solo was arrogant, and pig headed, and cocky; but he was also brave, and good hearted, and loved Leia more than he was willing to admit. *And Leia loves him too*, Luke reflected, and that was the true reason he felt compelled to seek out the Corellian pilot before it was too late. True to form, Luke found Han in one of the many pubs of Cloud City.

"Hey kid," Han said upon seeing Luke. "Come and join me."

Luke took a seat beside Han, seeing at once that he'd had more than a few.

"Something happened between you and Leia earlier didn't it?" Luke asked.

Han frowned. "What makes you think that? No, wait, I know; dear old Dad told you, right?"

"My father told me nothing," Luke replied. "I just know when my sister is upset, and usually why. What happened?"

"I don't wanna talk about it," Han grumbled, taking a swig of his ale.

Luke looked at him and shook his head. "You just don't get it, do you Han?"

"What?"

"You may not want to admit it, even to yourself, but I know you're nuts about Leia," Luke replied. Han was about to retort, but Luke cut him off. "What's more, I also know that you and my father can't stand one another."

"Not gonna argue with that," Han remarked sourly. "So what?"

"So what?" Luke repeated, starting to get annoyed with Han's attitude. "If you really want to be with Leia, you need a serious attitude adjustment."

Han scowled. "I don't need this crap," he snapped. "You're just like your father, Luke. The whole lot of you are all alike. And here I thought you and me were friends," he grumbled, raising his glass to take another swig of his ale, only to have it snatched from him by an invisible hand.

"Will you just shut up?" Luke asked in exasperation. "Just for once? And listen for a change? I'm trying to help you, whether or not you believe it. Do you want to be with my sister, yes or no? 'Cause if the answer is no, I'll leave you alone right now and stop wasting my time."

Luke stood up, as Han watched him warily, seeing if the young man was bluffing. When Luke turned to walk away, Han realized that he wasn't, and called him back.

"Shit Luke," Han grumbled. "When did you get all confrontational?"

Luke turned back and smiled. "You sort of bring it out when you're acting like a jackass."

"Oh, nice," Han muttered. "Sit down."

"So am I to assume that you care about my sister?" Luke asked before he sat down.

"You know damn well that I do," Han grumbled. "You and your Jedi powers."

Luke's smile grew as he took his seat. "It doesn't take a Jedi to see the way you look at one another, Han. But if you don't do something to fix the mess you made, you're going to lose her."

"Leia loves me, kid," Han replied confidently. "She told me so herself. She's not going anywhere."

"Would you listen to yourself?" Luke replied. "It's that cocky arrogant attitude that will cause you to lose her if you're not careful. I suggest you join my family for supper tonight if you don't believe me."

Han frowned, not liking what he was hearing. "What do you mean by that?" he asked.

"You'll have to come and see for yourself," Luke replied, standing up again. "We're having dinner in one hour. Be there Han; if you care at all about Leia, you need to be there."

A cold sense of fear was worming its way through Han's alcoholic haze. He did love Leia, even if he wasn't ready to admit it to even himself. The thought that she may walk out of his life was not one that he wanted to entertain, no matter how unlikely he considered that possibility to be.

Anakin had made arrangements for dinner in one of the private dining rooms in one of the most exclusive restaurants in Cloud City. It was his sincere hope that something would grow from the initial attraction he sensed between his daughter and the young imperial lieutenant. Keller was everything Han Solo was not, Anakin reasoned. *And that is why he is perfect for Leia*, he thought as he buttoned up his tunic.

"Don't think I don't know what is going through that mind of yours, Ani," Padmé said as she entered the bedroom. She sat down at the dressing table to touch up her make up.

"I have no idea what you are talking about," Anakin replied, looking at her reflection in the mirror.

"Please," she said, shaking her head. 'You forget how well I know you, Anakin Skywalker,' she told him. "I saw the way you looked at that young lieutenant. You are hoping he'll catch Leia's eye."

"I think he already has," Anakin replied, smiling at his own reflection.

She looked up at him. "Leia loves Han Solo," she reminded him, "even if she finds this young man attractive, for he certainly is that."

Anakin raised his eyebrows and looked at his wife. "Oh?? You think so, do you?"

Padmé smiled. "Well, I may be married but I'm not blind," she teased him.

Anakin did not know what to say to such a statement, and his masculine ego was more than a little threatened by it. "Well, I suppose if you like that pretty boy look," he said, turning away.

"Oh come on now," she said. "Don't sulk. You know exactly the sort of man that I am attracted to."

"Well, I thought I did," he replied in an excessively injured tone. "But maybe I was wrong."

Padmé stood up and walked over to him. "You are such a baby sometimes," she said, reaching up and kissing his cheek.

Anakin couldn't help but laugh. "I can't get away with anything around you, can I?"

"Not a chance," she said, wrapping her arms around his waist. "Besides, I think I made it quite clear the depth of my attraction to you last night, didn't I?"

Anakin grinned. "Several times in fact," he added.

Padmé laughed. "Yes, that's true. Come on," she said, releasing him and taking his hand. "Let's get going. Promise me you'll behave yourself tonight."

"You mean at dinner, or later?" he asked her with a grin.

"At dinner of course," she replied. "Once we're alone you can be as naughty as you like," she told him with a smile.

"Don't say things like that to me as we're going out the door," he told her. "Now I'm all distracted."

"Good," she said. "Then my strategy worked."

Anakin shook his head. "Politicians," he muttered as he and his wife left their quarters. Padmé only laughed.

Leia met her parents in the dining room, having taken the time to change into a simple outfit of a white skirt and tunic with matching boots. She had done her best to put Han Solo out of her mind, and was determined to enjoy the evening. The fact that a handsome young man from her home world would be present this evening made the prospect of doing so even greater. *I only wish Han would be there to witness this*, she thought. He had hurt her deeply with his callous attitude, and she wanted to hurt him back. Given the opportunity to make him jealous, she would gladly do so. *Too bad he won't be there to see the way I flirt with Lieutenant Keller*, she thought. *That would serve him right.*

"Good evening, Princess."

Leia looked over to see none other than Lieutenant Keller in the door way, looking even more dashing than she had remembered. She smiled. "Hello Lieutenant," she replied. "It was nice that you were able to join us. Where is Admiral Piett?"

"He'll be along shortly," Keller replied. "Shall we sit down? I see your parents are already here."

Leia nodded. "Yes, let's join them, shall we?" Anakin greeted the young man warmly, shaking hands with him. He noted how Keller pulled out Leia's chair for her, and how he knew just what to say to both the ladies present. *Class, that's something Solo has none of, class*, Anakin reflected, pleased that his plans were going so well.

Piett soon joined them, Obi-Wan and Luke shortly thereafter. The atmosphere was pleasant, cordial and relaxed as all present enjoyed the ambiance and the fine appetizers served with the utmost of taste. And then Han Solo walked in the door.

"Hey everybody," he said as he sat down in the eighth and only empty chair at the table. Luke smiled to himself, happy that Han had taken his advice to heart. Anakin, however, was less than pleased to see the young man, and did not even try to hide it.

"Solo," he said, staring daggers at Han. "I don't recall inviting you tonight," Anakin said, keeping his voice low so as not to alarm his wife.

"Luke here did," Han said, jerking a thumb in Luke's direction. "Good thing too, 'cause I'm hungry enough to eat a gundark!"

Luke knew that his father was staring at him, that he was furious with him, and he carefully avoided eye contact with him. Instead he looked at Leia, whose face was a mixture of emotions. She looked back at him, questioningly. *Was this a mistake?* He asked her silently. *No*, she replied. *I'm glad he's here. This is perfect.* She smiled, and Luke began to think that there was more to his sister's calm demeanor than met the eye.

"I hope that's okay," Luke said at last.

"Of course it is," Padmé spoke up, not giving Anakin a chance to voice his most decided opinion on the subject. "Han is always welcome at our table."

Anakin turned and looked at his wife, and then at his daughter, and then finally at his son. *I am **not** happy about this*, he told Luke silently.

Luke smiled. "I thought so," he told his mother. "Looks great," he said, helping himself to the plate of appetizers in front of him.

Han relaxed a little, but only a very little. He could feel Anakin's eyes upon him, and it took all of his considerable self-confidence to remain undaunted. He finally looked at Leia, smiling at her. She, however, was not looking at him. No, her attention was focused completely on the young man seated beside her, a very handsome young man wearing an imperial uniform. Leia seemed to be completely enchanted by him, for she had seemingly not even noticed Han's presence.

"You look great, Leia," Han said, trying to steer her attention in his direction. "Is that a new outfit?" he asked lamely.

Leia turned to him, her dark eyes devoid of emotion. "Yes," she replied, and turned her attention back to Keller.

Han felt embarrassed by her slight, and shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

Anakin noticed the exchange, and relaxed. *Leia knows exactly what she's doing*, he realized. *Solo has no idea what he's in for.* He looked at Padmé and took her hand. "Of

course,” he said to her. “Solo is most welcome here tonight,” he said.

Padmé narrowed her eyes, knowing her Ani well enough to see that there was more to his words than he said. *Poor Han*, she thought, looking over at him as he tried to get comfortable. *He won't know what hit him.*

“Lieutenant Keller was just telling me about his experiences at the Academy,” Leia said. “Quite a remarkable student from the sound of it. I’m very impressed.”

Keller, who was quite unaware of the role he had inadvertently stumbled into, merely smiled, his cheeks coloring slightly under her praise. “Well, your highness, the Imperial navy does have rather high standards,” he said simply.

“Don’t be so modest, Keller,” Piett spoke up. “He was the youngest ever to make lieutenant, isn’t that right, Danison?”

“Is that right?” Leia asked, her enthusiasm positively gushing forth. “*I* was the youngest ever to be named senator! Imagine that!”

Anakin had to cover his mouth to hide his smirk, and coughed in order to cover his chuckle. Leia was certainly having fun with this situation. *Serves you right, you slimy bastard*, he thought, enjoying the look on Han’s face. *You don't play with my daughter's emotions and get away with it.*

As for Luke, a sinking feeling had started to grow within him, a feeling that he had made a terrible mistake in inviting Han to this dinner party. He had truly believed that he was acting in Han’s best interest; being young and naïve in the ways of the heart, he had no idea that Leia was using the opportunity to make him jealous. *And she's doing an excellent job*, Luke reflected as he glanced at his friend.

“So tomorrow is the big day,” Piett said. “We will rendezvous with the Rebel fleet at the coordinates provided by Princess Leia,” he said, looking at Leia. “And you, Luke, will be the first person they see,” he added, turning to Luke. “I think that is the best plan, considering they are bound to be rather shocked to see an Imperial ship in their midst.”

“Not just any Imperial ship,” Anakin pointed out. “The flagship of the fleet. I’d give anything to see the looks on their faces,” he added with a smile.

The rest of the meal carried on in much the same vein as they ironed out the plans for the merger with the Rebel Fleet the next day. Han, try as he may, was not able to divert Leia’s attention from the dashing young officer; and as the evening progressed, his mood became more and more sullen. The fact that he had imbibed rather heavily earlier did nothing to keep his spirits aloft.

Leia knew that he was hurting and upset with her. She didn’t need to be Force sensitive to see it; it was obvious to all. Part of her felt badly for putting him through the wringer this way, but another part of her felt perfectly justified in doing so. *He's had it way too easy*, she realized. *I've been like a silly school girl when it comes to him. Well no more; if he wants me, then he's going to have to work a lot harder than he has been up until now.*

The evening ended early, as all realized that the next morning held a great deal in store for all. Luke followed Han out of the room, anxious to have a word with him in private.

“Han, wait,” Luke said as Han started walking away.

Han turned and looked at Luke, the anger plain in his eyes. “Thanks a lot, Luke,” he said bitterly. “I hope you and your family enjoyed that.”

“Han, I had no idea what was going on,” Luke replied. “I swear it! I had no idea that Leia was going to do that to you.”

Han scowled, knowing Luke was just naïve enough to be sincere in his ignorance. “So who is this...this Keller chump, anyway?” he grumbled.

“He’s the Imperial liaison who’s going to be working with us,” Luke explained.

“Oh, great,” Han replied with a shake of his head. “Leia will get to spend all kinds of time with him then. Just perfect.”

Luke couldn’t help but smile. “You really do love her, don’t you?”

“Of course I do,” Han retorted hotly. “You think I’d put up with all this bullshit if I didn’t?”

Luke’s smile only grew.

“I’m goin’ to bed,” Han grumbled as he turned away.

“You know what you have to do now, don’t you?” Luke called after him.

Han stopped in his tracks. “What?” he asked without turning around.

“You have to fight for her,” Luke replied. “You need to show her that you love her, Han. She’s not going to sit around and wait for you if you don’t, no matter how she feels about you.”

Han considered Luke’s words. *For a farm boy he’s pretty smart*, he reflected. “Yeah, I know,” he admitted at last. “I just hope this pretty boy hasn’t caught her attention.”

Luke smiled. “She is crazy about you, Han,” Luke told him. “Trust me on that. She just wants you to appreciate her, that’s all.”

“How’d you get so smart all of a sudden?” Han asked.

Luke laughed. “Guess I’m growing up,” he said. “Come on, we have a long day ahead of us tomorrow.”

Chapter 63

Chapter 63

"I think that went rather well," Anakin said as he and Padmé entered their suite, "in spite of the rather poor display of manners by Captain Solo."

"I couldn't help but feel sorry for him," Padmé said as she sat down on one of the large sofas in the sitting area. "Leia certainly did do her best to make him feel jealous. I wonder why that is? Do you have any idea?"

"I'm not sure, but I think they had a disagreement earlier today," he told her as he joined her on the sofa. "She sort of interceded when he and I were having words, and I had the impression that there was considerable tension between the two of them when I left."

The door chime opened at this point, and Luke entered the room. "Hi," he said. "I hope you don't mind me showing up so late like this."

"Of course not," Padmé said, smiling at her son. "Come and join us. Your father was just telling me about a conversation he had earlier with Han."

"I had one earlier with him too," Luke told his parents as he sat down. "I'm sorry I brought him along tonight," he added, looking at his father. "I really had the best intentions in mind."

"We know that, Luke," Padmé said. "Don't we Anakin?"

"Yes, I suppose so," Anakin replied. "I don't think things turned out exactly the way Solo had hoped for, though."

"No, they didn't," Luke replied. "He was pretty sore at me, thinking I'd set him up. What was with Leia? Any idea what went on with them earlier?"

"I was just explaining that to your mother," Anakin said. "She interrupted Solo and I when we were having words earlier and..."

Padmé interrupted him. "I thought you promised Leia that you were going to try and get along better with Han?" she said.

"I did," Anakin replied. "You can't blame me if he is rude and arrogant. I overheard him talking to Lando Calrissian about some debts he owes to Jabba the Hutt, Padmé. Jabba the Hutt! That tells you a lot about the sort of man he is."

"And was that the reason for your argument with him?" she asked.

"I don't even know how it started," he replied. "Believe it or not, I was going to offer him some help with Jabba, but I didn't even get the chance. He just got all defensive with me and before I knew it we were shouting at one another. If Leia hadn't shown up when she did, I don't know what would have happened."

"Han is a proud guy, Dad," Luke said. "He's pretty embarrassed by his past associations with Jabba."

"That doesn't excuse him, Luke," Anakin replied. "He has no respect, no manners. I don't like him, Luke. He's arrogant and has no consideration for anyone or anything, including Leia."

"You may be right about that, Dad," Luke said. "He said something to me earlier that really upset me."

Anakin frowned. "What did he say?" he asked.

"Yes Luke, what did he say?"

The three turned to see Leia entering the room. She looked at her parents, and then back to her brother. "Tell me what he said, Luke."

Luke glanced at his parents, feeling uncomfortable under his sister's scrutiny.

"I need to know, Luke," Leia said. "My eyes are beginning to open where Han is concerned."

Luke took a deep breath. "Well," he began. "I wanted to talk to Han, to tell him about... well; about this young officer that... uh... that Dad was trying to set you up with."

Anakin opened his mouth to object to his son's accusation, but, seeing Padmé looking at him out of the corner of his eye, decided not to. Luke was right, after all.

"And what did he say?" Leia asked.

"Well I didn't actually tell him about Lieutenant Keller," Luke continued. "Just that if he cared about you he ought to come to dinner. I guess the fact that he came means that he does. In fact, he told me just a little while ago that..."

"What did he say, Luke?" Leia asked, fixing her eyes on her brothers in the same unnerving manner that their father had.

"Yes, you said it upset you, Luke," Padmé said. "Leia ought to know if that is the case."

"He said that you told him you love him, Leia," Luke said at last. "And that you're not going anywhere."

Anakin uttered a Huttese curse under his breath and took a deep breath to master his anger.

"Do you see what I mean now by arrogant?" he said at last, looking at Padmé. "Now do you understand why I dislike this man so much?"

"Dad, please," Leia said, trying to hide how shaken she was by Luke's disclosure. "I know that sounds awful, but you don't know him like I do. There's more to him than just the arrogance you've seen. He's more than just a scoundrel, Daddy," Leia told him. "I've seen more, a lot more. That's why I don't understand any of this. I really thought he loved me....he does love me, I know it! So why is he acting this way? Why is he doing his best to push me away?"

"What happened earlier Leia?" Padmé asked gently. "Your father seems to think you and Han had a disagreement."

Leia sighed. "I asked him what happened between Dad and him," she replied. "And he said that you were eavesdropping on him when he was talking to Lando," she added, looking at Anakin. "Is that true?"

"Well, it wasn't intentional," Anakin replied. "I just happened to arrive when they were in the midst of a heated discussion, and I guess I heard enough to know what they were talking about."

"Well then you know more than me," Leia told him. "When I asked Han what the conversation had been about, he accused me of interrogating him. And when I told him that I thought that I was mistaken in believing that there was something between the two of us, he didn't deny it! He's been just playing with me! Just leading me along, and like some stupid school girl and I've let him!"

Anakin felt torn between his paternal instincts: one was telling him to comfort his child and the other was telling him to find Han Solo and tear him limb from limb. Fortunately for Han, the gentler of the two won out, and he came over and put a comforting arm around Leia's shoulders.

"He's not good enough for you, Leia," he told her gently as he stroked her hair. "Do you see that now? He's offensive, and arrogant, and has a shady past that makes him completely untrustworthy. Do you want to know what he was talking to Lando about?"

Leia looked up at him and nodded.

"He was asking him for money so he could pay off his debts to Jabba the Hutt," Anakin told her. "Leia, the man is a mercenary, a smuggler, a criminal! Anyone who would willingly associate with the Hutts is the lowest scum there is!"

Leia could not argue with her father's assessment of Han's past; but she had seen more to him than Anakin had. She had seen the gentle side, the side that would protect her from anything if he needed to. Leia knew that Han loved her, even if he was too stubborn and pig-headed to admit it. *But is that enough? If he cannot even tell me how he feels about me, what hope is there that there could possibly be a future between us?*

"Ani, you can't judge the man that way," Padmé chided. "Everyone is entitled to a second chance. Everyone is capable of changing for the better. You're living proof of that."

"Our circumstances are completely different," Anakin retorted. "Han Solo is completely complacent in his own little self-serving existence. You heard what he said to Luke; he figures he's got Leia right where he wants her, and doesn't feel that he needs to give anything back in return. Does that sound like a man who would change for anything or anybody?"

"Well he did tell me earlier that he loved Leia," Luke said, trying to stick up for his friend. "He couldn't deny that."

"He may very well love her, but he will never commit to her, Luke," Anakin replied. "Men like him don't make commitments, they just use women and then..."

"Stop it!" Leia cried, jumping to her feet. "Would you please all just stop?" She sighed and took a moment to regain her composure. "Look, I love all of you, and know you are all trying to do what is best for me. But this is my problem, my mess. I am old enough to know what I want and what I need, so please just let me make my own decisions in this, alright? Please?"

Anakin nodded. "Very well," he said, standing up. "Just know that I won't stand by and allow him to use you, Leia. I won't stand for that."

"None of us will," Luke put in.

Leia nodded, feeling deeply loved by her family. "I know," she said, "and I appreciate that you want to protect me, truly I do."

"Perhaps we all should think about sleep," Padmé suggested. "Tomorrow is a big day for all of us."

"You're right," Anakin said, standing up. Luke stood up as well. He wrapped his arms around Leia and gave her a kiss on the cheek. "Get some sleep," he said.

"I will," she said, "goodnight, Daddy."

Anakin turned to Luke. "And you," he said with a smile. "Have a major role in our little drama tomorrow."

Luke smiled. "Yeah, don't remind me," he muttered.

"You're not nervous, are you Luke?" Padmé asked.

"Well, no," Luke replied. "Well, maybe a little."

Anakin smiled and put his hands on Luke's shoulders. "You'll do great, Luke, I just know it."

Luke smiled, appreciating his father's vote of confidence. "I'll do my best," he replied. "Thanks, Dad."

"You coming, Angel?" Anakin asked as he started to walk towards the bedroom.

"Yes, in a moment," she said, standing up. "Just saying good night to the children."

Anakin left his family alone and headed for the bedroom, as Padmé kissed Luke goodnight.

As Luke walked out the door, Padmé turned to Leia. "Sit down," she said. "I think you and I need to have a chat."

Leia sat down, secretly pleased at her mother's suggestion. Surely she of all people would understand how Leia felt.

"Now, tell me about you and Han," Padmé began.

Leia shrugged. "I'm not sure there's much to tell, really," she said, fussing with the fold in her skirt. "I thought there was more between us, but now I'm beginning to have my doubts."

Padmé listened, sensing how disappointed her daughter was. "Do you love him? Or are you in love with him?"

Leia looked up at her mother. "Isn't that the same thing?"

Padmé smiled. "No, I don't believe so," she replied. "You can love someone, care deeply for them but not be in love with them."

“How do you know then?” Leia asked. “How did you know?”

Padmé thought back to that day so long ago on Geonosis. She and Anakin were about to be lead out into a coliseum full of aliens who were anxious to watch their execution. She remembered feeling so afraid, but not of death; of not being able to tell Anakin how she felt before she died. And so she had. After months, perhaps years of denial, she finally admitted to herself and to him that she loved him. But it was more than love; it was as though he were a very part of her. More than twenty years later she still felt that same way.

“Mom?”

Padmé shook herself from her reverie. “I was just thinking about the day I told you father I loved him for the first time,” she told Leia. ‘He and I had known one another for years, since we were both children. Your father has never been one to hide his feelings, and he had told me how he felt. I felt the same way, but because of our circumstances, I couldn’t tell him. It seemed impossible that we could ever be together, and I didn’t want to give in to something I figured could never work. But I couldn’t deny how I felt for long. You see Leia, I felt as though your father was a part of me; the thought of being apart from him was painful. Those years when we were apart so much, during the Clone Wars, it was like a part of me was missing.’ She stopped, trying to put into words the depth of the love she shared with Anakin. “Your father and I share something very unique, Leia — it’s like we are a part of one another. But it’s not just love, it’s companionship too. He is my best friend in the galaxy, and there is no one I’d rather be with than him. He may drive me crazy sometimes,” she added with a smile, “but that’s all part of the package.”

“Well Han certainly drives me crazy,” Leia said with a laugh. Her mother’s words had moved her, and had made her question how she truly felt about Han. Granted, the depth of love that existed between her parents was unique, just as they themselves were.

“You obviously have feelings for him,” Padmé said, seeing that her daughter was struggling. “But are they serious? Can you see yourself making a future with him? Having a family with him? Growing old with him?”

Leia frowned. “No,” she admitted softly. ‘I can’t. I can’t even imagine him wanting children, or ever settling down. Dad is probably right about him; he’s not the sort who will ever commit to woman.’ She shook her head as tears filled her eyes. “I’ve been acting like a silly school girl,” she told her mother. “I feel like such an idiot!”

Padmé reached over and took Leia’s hand. “Don’t be so hard on yourself, Leia,” she told her gently. “You’re very young, and if I may say so rather inexperienced when it comes to men. If this is meant to be, then things will work out. If not, then think of it as a learning experience. It’s not like you’ve been involved with him in a physical nature....is it?” she asked hopefully.

Leia shook her head. “No,” she said, wiping a tear from her cheek. “We’ve kissed, but that’s it.”

Thank the Maker for that, Padmé thought with relief. “You know, perhaps the little performance you put on tonight will be the kick in the pants he needs,” she said with a smile.

Leia couldn’t help but laugh. “You think so?” she asked. “I was starting to feel a little guilty after a while.”

“Don’t,” Padmé replied. ‘From what I’ve heard, he could stand to be taken down a peg or two. You were masterful, by the way,’ she added with a smile. “The consummate actress.”

Leia smiled. “I just wonder if it will end up pushing him further away,” she said.

“If he cares about you at all, it definitely will not,” Padmé averred. “Trust me.”

Leia raised her eyebrows. “Oh?” she said. “Sounds like you have some experience in this, Mom.”

Padmé laughed. “Well, let’s just say it doesn’t take much to make your father jealous,” she said. “I remember one occasion when he was off at the war, and my sister and her husband came to Coruscant for a visit. Your father saw me with my brother-in-law on the holonet, I was on it sometimes since I was in the public eye, and it made him insane with jealousy. He didn’t know who your uncle was, and jumped to all sorts of conclusions.”

“What?!” Leia exclaimed. “He didn’t trust you?”

“Well it wasn’t that,” Padmé replied. “I suppose the fact that he and I were forced to keep our marriage a secret was getting to him, and when he saw a man he didn’t recognize kissing me in public, it made him crazy. He ended up finding a way to come home, and just showed up at the apartment, where, of course, Sola and Darred here. I thought your father was going to kill Darred when he saw him in our home.”

Leia laughed, being able to picture her father in such situation quite easily. “Dad adores you,” Leia said with a smile. “You know when he was still Darth Vader, before I knew that he was my father, he told me that you were the reason he was helping me.”

“Did he?” Padmé asked, surprised by Leia’s disclosure.

Leia nodded. “Yes,” she said. ‘Even as Darth Vader he loved you,’ she said. “It was so difficult for him to talk about you and what he believed had happened to you.” She smiled. “It must be wonderful to be loved that much.”

Padmé nodded. “Yes, it is,” she said. ‘Well, it’s getting late,’ she said. “Time for both of us to get to bed.”

Leia nodded as they both stood up. “Thanks Mom,” She said, hugging Padmé. “It felt good to talk to someone who understands.”

Padmé smiled. “That’s what moms are for, Leia.” She kissed her on the cheek. ‘Good night, love. Sleep well.’

“You too, Mom.”

Chapter 64

Chapter 64

None of the Skywalkers slept much that night. Although the Rebel Alliance had been informed that they would be arriving the next day, it was still bound to be a shock for them when the massive super star destroyer appeared in their midst.

Leia was on her way to join her family for one final meal together before they left when she was met in the corridor by Han Solo. She did her best not to appear happy to see him, though secretly she was. Despite everything, she could not deny the feelings she had for him.

"Morning Princess," Han said, feeling uncharacteristically nervous around the young woman. "Big day I guess, eh?"

Leia nodded. "Yes it is," she said. "What are *your* plans, Han?" she asked.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"I mean if we'd remained on Hoth you would have gone to pay off Jabba by now," Leia told him. "I just assumed you'd be anxious to get on your way."

Han could see that Leia was still hurt by what had transpired between them the previous day, and it made him feel even more ashamed than he already did. "Look, Leia," he began, "about yesterday. I acted like a real jerk, and I just wanted to..."

"Yes, you certainly did," she replied, folding her arms over her chest.

"I'm trying to apologize," Han retorted hotly. "If you'd just give me a chance."

"I'm listening," Leia replied.

Han wiped his hands, which had become rather sweaty, on his pants as he tried to put together the right words to say. He wasn't a man who often admitted to being wrong, much less apologizing. But he knew that if he did not at least make an attempt, Leia would be lost to him forever. And that was not something he cared to contemplate.

"I suppose you just caught me at a bad moment," he began lamely, "and I was kinda short with you, and I'm sorry."

Leia nodded. "Thank you for apologizing," she replied. "I know that isn't something you do easily."

"No, it isn't," he replied. "But, well, I figured I owed you after the way I acted."

"I see," Leia responded, watching him closely. "Is that the only reason?" she asked.

"What do you mean?" he asked warily.

"Never mind," she muttered, trying to walk past him. She had given him the perfect opportunity to tell her how he felt about her, and yet he had not.

“So are we cool then?” he asked, stepping in front of her.

She looked up at him, doing her best to hide her disappointment. “Cool?” she replied. ‘Yes, that’s a very good word for what we are, Han,’ she told him as she tried again to get past him. “Will you please let me pass?” she asked in exasperation.

Han frowned. “What’s going on?” he demanded. And then a thought struck him. ‘You... you like that pretty boy officer don’t you?’ he asked. “That’s why you’re giving me the cold shoulder, isn’t it?”

Leia shook her head. “Do I have to spell everything out for you, Han?” she asked him.

“Yeah, I think maybe you do,” he replied.

She looked at him, trying to decide how much longer she ought to let him twist in the wind. “What difference would it make to you if I did?”

Han had played cards since he was a boy, and had become very good at it. He knew when it was time to call someone’s bluff; he knew when it was time to fold, and when it was time to put all your cards on the table. At this moment, he felt sure that if he did not show Leia his hand, she would leave his life for good.

“Yeah, it would,” he told her at last. “A hell of a big difference, and I think you know it, Leia.”

Leia had to fight to hide her smile at his reply. “Why is that?” she pressed, forcing him to say the words.

“You know why,” he grumbled.

“No, I don’t think I do,” Leia replied. “You told my brother how sure you were that I *wasn’t going anywhere*, is that how you put it?” she told him, a spark of anger in her dark eyes.

“That kid has a big mouth,” Han muttered. “That was a stupid thing to say, I admit it.”

“Yes it was,” Leia replied. “It makes me wonder if I made a mistake telling you how I feel.”

Han frowned. “Why would you say that?” he asked

Leia sighed, frustrated by his stubborn refusal to be open with her.

“Just forget it,” she said at last. “I need to go, Han. Thank you for the apology. I know how painful it must have been for you.”

Han was unable to respond, as Leia swept past him and walked away. *Damn it*, he thought in frustration. *Maybe I’m just fooling myself.*

Leia continued on her way, determined not to let the uncomfortable encounter with Han ruin the excitement of the day. She found her parents in the dining room, speaking to one another, the closeness between them obvious. It was uncanny how the two of them could tune out the rest of the room, the rest of the galaxy even, when they were together. *I want that with*, she thought wistfully. *He adores my mother, she means everything to him. Han is incapable of such devotion... he’s too wrapped up in himself to love someone that completely.*

“Good morning,” she said, smiling at her parents.

Anakin and Padmé looked up to greet their daughter, and immediately Anakin could see that she was doing her best to hide how upset she was. *Solo*, Anakin thought angrily as Leia took a seat beside him.

“Did you sleep well?” Padmé asked her daughter.

“Not really,” Leia replied. “Too much going on I guess.”

Anakin nodded. “It’s a big day,” he agreed. “I wonder where Luke is,” he said.

“He’ll be along soon I’m sure,” Leia said, helping herself to some juice. “You know him and food.”

Padmé laughed. “Sounds like his father,” she said, giving Anakin a smile.

“Well, I’m a big man, Padmé,” he said in self defense as he helped himself to another helping of eggs. “I’d starve to death if I ate what you eat.”

Padmé and Leia both laughed. “We wouldn’t want that, now would we Mom?” Leia said, leaning over and kissing her father’s cheek.

“Not a chance,” Padmé replied. She looked up as Luke entered the room. ‘There he is,’ she said. “There’s still some food left Luke,” she told her son. “I’ve managed to hold off your father.”

Luke smiled as he sat beside his mother. “You are the *best*,” he told her, kissing her cheek.

It had been determined at an earlier date that Han and Chewbacca would return to the Rebel Fleet in the *Falcon*, while the Skywalker family and Obi-Wan would travel on board the *Executor*. Leia was disappointed when the decision had been made that Han would not be traveling with them; but now she was glad. She wanted to put some distance between them, hoping that one of two things would happen: either he would come to realize how much she meant to him and change his tune, or she would get over him.

The mood in the shuttle on the trip over to the *Executor* was one of nervous excitement. The fate of the galaxy was in their hands, and everyone present was keenly aware of this. While Anakin was looking forward to shocking the Rebel leaders, Leia and Luke were a little nervous about how they would react. Perhaps it was best that they had not told them that it was the *Executor*, for no doubt the conservative leaders would have refused to trust Piett and his crew. Once the *Executor* was in their midst, the matter would be a moot point.

“Quite an historical day this is, wouldn’t you say?” Obi-Wan asked Anakin and Padmé as they neared the enormous ship.

“Let us hope so,” Padmé replied. “Let’s hope that the Alliance sees it that way.”

“Do they know who I am?” Anakin asked Obi-Wan. “Or who I was?”

“They don’t know that you were Darth Vader until recently, no,” Obi-Wan replied. “I was thinking about that, and whether we ought to tell them.”

“I’m not sure how it will be avoidable,” Anakin said. “They will no doubt want to know where I have been for the past twenty years. If they are to trust me, they must know the whole

truth.”

“Yes, I think you’re right,” Obi-Wan said. “Let’s just hope that they can put aside their animosity for Darth Vader in order to embrace this new alliance.”

“If they truly want peace, they will,” Padmé said. “The *Executor* and its crew will tip the scales in the favor of the Alliance, not to mention the addition of the Chosen One to their ranks,” she added, looking at Anakin with a smile.

“If they accept me,” Anakin reminded her. “Knowing that I have been Darth Vader for the past twenty years may make that impossible for them. All we can do is wait and see, and hope that they realize that what we propose is the only chance to end the conflict in the galaxy.”

“Dad, Mom, we’re about to dock,” Luke said as he entered the hold.

“Very well,” Padmé said. “We’re ready, aren’t we gentlemen?”

Obi-Wan and Anakin looked at one another. “Another adventure for Kenobi and Skywalker,” Obi-Wan said with a smile.

Anakin nodded. “Let’s hope we haven’t lost our touch in our old age,” he remarked with a smile.

Obi-Wan chuckled.

“Well here we are,” Lieutenant Keller announced as he entered the hold.

“Let us be off,” Anakin said, standing up. He held out a hand to his wife and together with their children they made their way towards the exit.

Nothing could have prepared anyone for the reception that awaited them when they descended the ramp. The hangar bay was full of troops, officers and crewmen, all waiting in anticipation for the arrival of their new allies. Upon seeing Anakin, the crowds erupted into loud cheers.

Anakin stood amidst the sea of cheering with his wife at his side, completely at a loss for words. Admiral Piett approached them with a smile. “As you can see,” he said above the cheering crowd, “they are rather pleased to see you.”

Anakin nodded, taken aback by the awesome reception and the overwhelming display of support. He turned to Padmé, who seemed as affected as he was.

“I guess we have no doubts about their cooperation,” Leia put in, delighted to see the great show of support for her father.

“Perhaps you ought to say something to them,” Padmé suggested.

Anakin looked at her, feeling rather unnerved at the prospect of addressing such a huge gathering. “I wasn’t expecting this,” he said. “I’m not prepared.”

“Come now, Anakin,” Obi-Wan urged. “Since when have you ever been at a loss for words?”

Luke and Leia had to laugh at his comment, as well as the expression on their father’s face.

“Very well,” he said, looking around, wondering how he would make himself heard amidst such an enormous throng.

“I’m afraid there is no platform here to stand on,” Piett told him, realizing what Anakin was looking for. “Only that balcony for the security alcove, but you have to go out into the corridor and down a ways to reach it.”

Anakin looked up at the alcove, trying to decide if he could make the jump up to it. He looked at Obi-Wan. “What do you think, Obi-Wan?” he asked. “Think I can make it?”

Obi-Wan looked up at the balcony thoughtfully. “It’s rather high,” he said. “And you’re not as young as you used to be, Anakin,” he couldn’t resist adding.

Anakin raised his eyebrows. “Still younger than you, old man,” he countered and then walked towards the balcony.

Obi-Wan merely smiled as Anakin nimbly leapt up to the balcony, to the astonishment of all assembled.

Anakin, who was secretly pleased that he’d managed the jump, smiled at his family, and then turned to the crowds surrounding them. He held up a hand to quiet them, and soon the enormous hanger was silent.

“My friends, today we stand upon the threshold of a new era,” he began. “When you decided to stand against the tyranny of the Empire, you set into motion a series of events that will change the destiny of the galaxy forever.”

The men assembled below erupted into cheers again. Anakin looked down at Padmé. He could see the tears in her eyes as she smiled back up at him.

Once the room became quiet again, Anakin continued his oration. “For twenty years the Rebel Alliance has been waging war against this tyranny. With our combined strength, we shall prevail against it!”

More cheers erupted from the room, and then a few of the men started chanting: *Skywalker! Skywalker! Skywalker!* It soon caught on and before long the whole room was chanting it. Anakin was too overwhelmed to say anymore, and turned to look at his family. They were no longer where they had been moments earlier, and he looked around for them, a moment of panic seizing him. But then they entered the alcove and joined him.

“Dad, this is unbelievable!” Luke said with a smile.

Anakin nodded. “This isn’t all for me, Luke,” he replied. “They realize that they are free of the servitude to an evil tyrant, they are finally free.”

Leia felt a lump in her throat, realizing that her father spoke as much of himself as he did the men before them. She took Anakin’s hand wordlessly.

“Now it’s time to free the rest of the galaxy,” Padmé said, linking her arms through Anakin’s.

Anakin nodded. “Yes it is,” he said. “It’s time we were on our way. Our allies are expecting us.”

Chapter 65

Chapter 65

The Rebel Fleet had been assembled for several days, with ships arriving sporadically as they made their way to the rendezvous point. Princess Leia's message had been well received by the rebel leaders, who were very relieved to learn that she was alive. Her disclosure that she and Luke had captured an Imperial ship was most welcome, for the rebels had begun to hear rumors that the Empire had begun construction on a second Death Star. Having an Imperial ship in their possession would enable the rebels to infiltrate the strict security surrounding the new space station in the hopes of finding a way to destroy it.

"Any word yet from the Princess?" General Dodonna asked as he entered the conference room on board the command ship.

Mon Mothma looked up from the datapad she was studying. "No, nothing yet," she replied. "She told me that she would be getting underway from Bespin first thing in the morning, and should arrive here mid afternoon."

"Well it's well into the afternoon," Dodonna replied. "They ought to be here soon."

Mothma nodded. "I just hope the shuttle they have in their possession is in good shape."

"You know it's a shuttle then?" Dodonna asked.

"What else could it be?" she replied, picking up her cup of tea and standing to look out the large view window. "Even with the help of Solo and Skywalker, they would not be able to capture anything larger, even if Skywalker believes he's a Jedi."

Dodonna was about to reply when before them a large distortion appeared in space. "Here's another one," Dodonna said, standing beside her to see which of their fleet had finally made it to the rendezvous. Neither of them was prepared for the sight that unfolded before their eyes. The ship that materialized before them was not a Rebel ship; no, it was far too large.

"What the devil..." Dodonna muttered. He and Mon Mothma watched as the gargantuan ship came into view. It was at least 10 kilometers in length, far larger than anything either of them had ever seen before.

Mon Mothma dropped her cup of tea to the floor, hearing it shatter into a hundred pieces. "It's an executor class star destroyer," she said in no more than a whisper. "They have found us, Jan! How could this have happened??" She turned and shouted an order to her aide. "Raise the shields! Alert the rest of the fleet!"

"There is message coming through from the imperial vessel, Commander," her aide replied, rushing into the room. "It's Luke Skywalker!"

Dodonna and Mon Mothma turned and looked at one another in utter confusion. "Skywalker?" Dodonna said. "The same one who destroyed the Death Star?"

Mon Mothma nodded and walked briskly over to the comm.. Activating the screen, she saw Luke Skywalker on board the imperial vessel.

"Skywalker!" Mon Mothma, she exclaimed. "What is the meaning of this??"

Luke smiled. "I think that is pretty obvious, Commander," Luke replied. "Princess Leia told you that we had an imperial ship in our possession. Well, this is it."

"You are trying to tell us that you have captured an imperial star destroyer? A super star destroyer?" Dodonna asked incredulously.

Luke shook his head. "No, not exactly," he replied. "Permission to come on board, Commander. We will explain everything once we get there, I promise."

Dodonna and Mon Mothma exchanged yet another look. "I don't think we have much choice in the matter," he said quietly. "They could blow us from the stars if they wanted to."

"I can assure you that this ship has no malicious intentions towards you," Luke said, hearing him despite his efforts to be secretive. "The fact that our shields are down should be proof enough of that."

Mon Mothma checked the read out on the ship and saw that Luke was telling the truth. "Very well," she said, nodding her head. "We look forward to hearing your explanation, Commander Skywalker."

Luke nodded. "See you soon. Skywalker out."

Luke's image faded from view.

"This is most irregular," Mothma muttered as she walked towards the door with Dodonna. "What could it all mean?"

"We'll find out soon enough, won't we?" Dodonna replied.

The two of them walked into the corridor and proceeded towards the hangar bay. They were met there by General Reikan and Admiral Ackbar, who had also seen the enormous ship materialize and were just as anxious to find out more about it as they were.

"Luke Skywalker is on his way here with an explanation," Dodonna told the other leaders. He turned as a dozen armed troops ran down the corridor to meet them.

"Is this necessary?" Ackbar asked.

"I hope not," Dodonna replied. "But there's no harm in being careful."

"Agreed," Reikan said. "Let's go."

The troops entered the hangar bay followed by the four leaders. Silently they watched as the imperial shuttle entered the large hangar bay and set down on the deck. Tension was high as the ramp descended and the doors opened. The troops readied themselves as the first of the passengers appeared in the doorway. It was Luke Skywalker, followed shortly thereafter by Princess Leia.

"Princess!" Reikan exclaimed, "Skywalker! It's good to see you both alive and well."

"Thank you General," Leia replied, and then turned to the doorway where an imperial officer emerged, looking rather uneasy.

“He is an ally, I promise you,” Luke said, sensing the tension level rising at the sight of an imperial officer.

“He’s a defector?” Reikan asked, not understanding.

“Well, in a manner of speaking, yes,” Leia replied, as another pair emerged from the shuttle. Mon Mothma watched in silent astonishment as Padmé Amidala and Anakin Skywalker appeared. Padmé looked at Mon Mothma and smiled, seeing how shocked she was to see her.

“I’m sure you all must be rather shocked by this,” Leia said to the leaders who simply stood simply staring at them all. “Perhaps we can go somewhere and talk.”

Mon Mothma nodded, not taking her eyes from Padmé and Anakin. “Yes, I think that’s a very good idea,” she said at last. “I for one have many questions.”

“I’m sure you do,” Padmé said. “It’s good to see you again, Mothma.”

“Padmé,” Mon Mothma said, walking towards her. “I... I thought you were dead! We all did!”

Padmé smiled. “It’s a very long story,” she said, taking Mothma’s hand. ‘One I will gladly share with you at some point,’ she told her. “But now we have more important issues to discuss.”

Mothma nodded. “Yes, of course,” she said, looking at Anakin. “And you’re alive too, General Skywalker?”

Anakin nodded. “Yes,” he replied. ‘Another long and involved story,’ he added, looking at his wife. “We will explain it all to you, I promise.”

“Very well,” Dodonna said. “Shall we go somewhere more conducive to discussion?”

“Yes, please,” Leia said. “Lead the way.”

The small party proceeded to a conference room nearby, leaving the armed troops behind. As they sat down, Leia introduced Lieutenant Keller to the rebel leaders.

“Lieutenant Keller is here as a representative of the crew of the *Executor*,” Leia explained.

“I’m afraid I don’t understand this,” Dodonna admitted. ‘When you said that you had captured an imperial ship, we expected a shuttle; and yet you show up with a star destroyer!’ “Obviously the two of you did not capture this ship,” Reikan said, addressing Luke and Leia.

“No,” Luke replied. ‘We did not. Actually, it was our father who is responsible for this,’ he said, turning to Anakin. “Not us.”

“Your *father*?” Mon Mothma replied. She looked at Anakin. “You’re Luke’s father?”

Anakin nodded. “And Leia’s as well,” he replied. ‘They are twins.’ He turned to Padmé. “Padmé is my wife, their mother.”

“But you are a Jedi,” Reikan said, not understanding. “I didn’t think Jedi were allowed to marry.”

"They weren't," Anakin replied with a smile. "But sometimes rules are meant to be broken," he added, looking at his wife.

"I'm afraid I'm confused," Mon Mothma said. "Princess Leia, you were raised in the Organa family, and yet you are Luke's twin? Why were you raised apart? And where have the two of you been for the past twenty years?" she asked, looking at Padmé and Anakin.

Anakin and Padmé looked at one another, realizing that this was an unavoidable question. Besides, if they were to gain the trust of their new allies, they needed to be totally truthful with them. And that included revealing the shocking truth about Anakin's alter ego, Darth Vader.

"The twins were separated at birth because I nearly died giving birth to them," Padmé replied. "I lost my memory due to the physical trauma, and have been on Naboo all this time, living in a convalescence home. If it weren't for Anakin, I'd still be there, and would never have regained my memory."

"That's incredible," Reikan commented, looking at Anakin. "But why was she in that home all those years?" he asked.

"I thought she was dead, along with the rest of the galaxy," Anakin replied. 'I also thought our child or rather our children were dead. The last time I saw her she was still with child,' he explained, looking at her. "But when I found our children, I realized that there was a chance she was still alive, and so I pursued it."

"I'm afraid I must be missing something," Mon Mothma spoke up. "You weren't with your wife when she gave birth to your children? Where were you? How is it you were so mislead?"

Anakin sighed, looking down at his hands folded on the table in front of him. There was no way to soften the blow, no way to make what he was about them easy to hear. All he could do was drop the bomb and try to withstand the fallout.

"I too nearly died on the day the twins were born," he began. "I was involved in a near fatal duel on the planet Mustafar, where I sustained serious, life threatening injuries. I was only able to survive by artificial means for the past twenty years, and only recently have received the reconstructive surgery I should have received twenty years ago."

"So you're saying that you too were in a convalescence facility?" Ackbar asked. "Is that why you haven't been seen in twenty years?"

Anakin shook his head. "No, that's not it at all Admiral. For the past twenty years I have been Darth Vader, enemy of the Alliance, right hand of the emperor."

The silence that pervaded the room at this astonishing revelation was tension filled and oppressive. Anakin looked at each of the Rebel leaders, seeing in their eyes and their minds their utter shock.

"*You* are Darth Vader?" Dodonna asked. "You?? How... how can that be?? You were the greatest Jedi in the galaxy! A hero! A defender of justice and champion of the Republic!"

"I was Darth Vader," Anakin replied. "Was. Twenty years ago, Palpatine managed to convince me that the Dark Side was the only way I could save my wife from what I believed was certain death. I had visions of her dying in childbirth, and he took full advantage of my

fears and fed on them, making me believe that embracing the Dark Side was the only way I could save her. I was so desperate to do so that I believed him, and did whatever he asked, becoming his henchman and his slave in the process.”

“I can’t believe it,” Reikan said, shaking his head. ‘You have murdered countless thousands of beings across the galaxy,’ he said. “You helped annihilate the Jedi! And now you expect us to trust you??”

General Dodonna sat quietly during Reikan’s outburst, his mind harkening back to the Battle of Yavin. Darth Vader had been largely responsible for the Alliance’s victory that day; not only that, he had saved the Princess Leia and had prevented the destruction of Alderaan. *Now it makes sense*, he thought, looking at Leia. *She is his daughter.*

“Yes, that is true,” Anakin said, looking down again. ‘I cannot deny any of that.’ He looked up at Reikan again. “But I promise you, General; the Darkness that defined my existence for two decades is gone. Finding my family has destroyed Darth Vader. I am Anakin Skywalker again, in every way. There is nothing I can do to bring back the lives I took, or undo the damage I caused. But there is a way for me to at least atone for it in a small way.” “And what is that?” Mon Mothma asked.

“By leading the crew of this mighty vessel out there under the banner of the Alliance,” Anakin replied. “There are one hundred thousand men out in that ship who hate the Empire and are tired of being a part of its tyrannical stranglehold on the galaxy.”

“You mean to say that they have mutinied?” Ackbar asked incredulously.

Keller spoke up at this point. “Yes we have,” he said, glad to have something to contribute to the conversation at last. ‘We want to end the fighting; we are no longer willing to wage a war that we consider morally wrong. The Empire is evil,’ he stated, looking at each of the leaders in turn. “We want to put an end to it. We want to help you put an end to it.”

Mon Mothma looked at her comrades, too shocked by all that she had just learned to reply. *We have an Imperial Star Destroyer on our side... not just a star destroyer, a Super Star destroyer, the flagship of the fleet. Not only that, we have the only Jedi in the galaxy... how can we say no to that??*

“I think I speak for my comrades when I say that we will need to consider all that we have been told,” Admiral Ackbar finally spoke up. ‘This is so highly unexpected, so... unprecedented. We must have some time to digest it all.’

“Of course,” Padmé said, ever the diplomat. “We will return to the *Executor*, and leave you to discuss what we have proposed.”

“Thank you,” Mon Mothma replied as everyone stood up. “We appreciate it.”

“Contact us when you are ready to talk to us,” Anakin said. “We’re not going anywhere.”

“We understand,” Reikan said.

Anakin turned to his wife and took her hand as they made their way out the door with their children.

“They’ll accept us, I just know it,” Leia said as they walked through the corridors.

Anakin was not so sure. “We shall see,” he said at last. “All we can do is wait now and hope that they can see the enormity of the opportunity before them.”

Padmé squeezed his hand. “They will,” she said. “Mon Mothma has always been open minded. I’m sure she can see the big picture here and will be happy to accept us if it means peace.”

Anakin merely nodded as they entered the hangar bay, not allowing himself to get hopeful. *If I hadn’t been Darth Vader for the past twenty years, then perhaps they would... but how can I expect them to trust someone who was their arch enemy mere months ago?*

“We shall see,” he said again as they boarded the shuttle, hoping that it wouldn’t be long before the decision was made, knowing that the wait would be a difficult one.

Chapter 66

Chapter 66

Han Solo and Chewbacca left Bespin several hours after the Skywalkers. Han was in a foul mood, as Chewbacca soon discovered. Grunting in response to his copilot's questions, he brooded sullenly about the last conversation he'd had with Leia. She'd been cool with him, cooler than she'd ever been. Han had become accustomed to Leia's temper; part of him even enjoyed going head to head with the fiery Princess. But her coldness he could not take. *It's that Imperial jackass*, Han thought petulantly. *He's to blame and I'll bet a thousand credits that her old man set the whole thing up.*

Chewbacca announced that he was about to make the jump to hyperspace, to which Han merely grunted in response. But when the hyperdrive engines failed to ignite, Han was forced to respond and respond quickly.

"What the hell is going on?" he demanded, sitting up and looking frantically at his controls. "Lando told me his men would fix this!"

Chewbacca tersely reminded Han of just how trustworthy Lando Calrissian was. Han frowned as he scrambled out of his seat and ran to the back of the ship to fix the recalcitrant hyperdrive. Chewbacca joined him at once, leaving the cockpit unattended as the ship cruised along. Neither of them noticed the ship that had been following them since they left Bespin. Neither of them noticed when it set its weapons on the *Falcon*. However when the ship drew close enough to place a tractor beam on the small freighter, both of them noticed at once.

"What the hell was *that*?" Han asked, pulling his head from the access hatch.

Chewbacca lumbered back to the cockpit followed quickly by Han. As soon as they looked at the screen, they knew what had happened.

"Tractor beam!" Han shouted, jumping into the pilot's seat. Frantically he tried to push against the invisible force field, but to no avail. They were trapped.

Han turned to Chewbacca as panic filled him. Chewbacca growled a Wookiee curse.

"Yeah, you and me both pal," Han muttered. "I think we'll find out soon enough who's behind this. In the mean time, let's make ourselves scarce."

Slowly the *Falcon* was drawn into the hangar bay of a strangely configured larger vessel. Han and Chewbacca, safely stowed in the secret storage compartments, listened with breath held as the ship was boarded and what sounded like two individuals commenced searching for the passengers. Han felt his heart pounding hard as the footfalls drew closer to the walkway where he and Chewbacca were hidden. They stopped, and then the two renegades soon began to hear the sound of an alien tongue. Han frowned, his fear doubling when he recognized it. It was the language of the Trandoshans, a violent, reptilian race who had a reputation for ruthlessness throughout the galaxy.

The footsteps started again, moving off. Han and Chewbacca looked at one another, blasters ready. Silently Han mouthed *one, two, three!* Chewie pushed open the hold with one mighty shove and the two burst forth ready to blast the intruders.

“*Stop right there, Solo,*” a sinister voice hissed from behind them. Han and Chewbacca slowly turned to see their captor, who stood with weapon trained squarely at them. He spoke briefly into a comlink, and soon his two comrades joined him.

“*Always nice to see you, Solo,*” the alien said as his associates took the weapons from Han and Chewbacca.

“Kiss my ass, Bossk,” Han replied tersely.

Bossk only response was a gruesome smile, his mouth open wide to reveal an alarming number of lethal looking teeth. “*Take them,*” he commanded.

Rebel Fleet Rendezvous— Star Destroyer Executor

Obi-Wan Kenobi hated feeling ill, but the past few days of little sleep and stress had taken its toll on the old Jedi. He had dearly wanted to accompany Anakin and his family to the Rebel command ship in order to lend his support to their cause. Granted, Generals Reikan and Dodonna were already well acquainted with Kenobi, and knew how close he was to both Luke and Leia; still, Obi-Wan felt his voice was one that needed to be heard in defense of Anakin Skywalker. *Perhaps there is more I can do than merely add my voice to their cause,* he thought as he sat in the small sitting room adjoining his quarters. *Perhaps there is something more significant I can do.*

Obi-Wan stood up and made left his quarters, heading to the suite where he knew Anakin and his family was waiting for the rebel response to their proposal. Several hours had passed since they had returned to the *Executor*, and it was a tension filled time for all. Arriving at their quarters, Obi-Wan found Anakin alone with his son and Lieutenant Keller. They looked up when he entered the room.

“How are you feeling, Ben?” Luke asked.

“Oh I’m fine,” Obi-Wan replied. “A nice sleep and I’m as good as new.”

Anakin watched his friend closely, worried about him. “Are you sure about that?” he asked.

“Yes,” Obi-Wan replied. “Quite. So tell me how things went on the command ship.”

Anakin shrugged. “Hard to say really,” he replied.

Obi-Wan nodded. “No doubt it was something of a shock learning that you were once Darth Vader.”

“You could say so,” Luke replied. “I thought their eyes were going to pop right out of their heads when Dad told them. They were completely blown away.”

“I’m sure,” Obi-Wan replied. “But the fact that they spoke to you is a good sign. It shows that they realize that you are no longer Darth Vader.”

“Possibly,” Anakin conceded. “But that may not be enough, Obi-Wan. Just the fact that I was Vader may be enough for them to damn me.”

Obi-Wan considered the dilemma for a moment. “I may have a solution that could help us convince them of your trustworthiness,” he said.

“What is that?” Luke asked.

“By showing them that you have the support of the Jedi behind you,” Obi-Wan replied. ‘Obviously my influence isn’t sufficient,’ he commented wryly. “But add Yoda’s to mine, I believe that would make a difference.”

Anakin nodded, beginning to grow hopeful. “Yes,” he replied. “That might just be the deciding factor. Surely if they realize that the Jedi believe in me they will see that I am no longer a threat to them.”

“My thinking exactly,” Obi-Wan said. “Perhaps we could arrange for a shuttle to go to Dagobah. I will go myself to bring Master Yoda here.”

“You’re not in any shape to be making such a long voyage,” Anakin replied.

“I am perfectly fine,” Obi-Wan retorted. “Besides, I have no intention of flying the damnable ship. You know how I hate to do that.”

Anakin and Luke exchanged a grin. “Yes, I know very well how much you hate to fly,” Anakin replied. He looked at Keller. “Can you arrange for a pair of clones to accompany General Kenobi to Dagobah?”

“I’ll see to it at once, sir,” Keller responded, standing up.

“Thank you, Lieutenant,” Obi-Wan said, glad that he would finally be contributing to the cause. “I would appreciate that.”

Rebel Command Ship

The rebel leaders had sat in stupefied silence for several minutes after the Skywalkers had left them. To them it was unimaginable that the man that had sat in their midst had been Darth Vader. Each of them was old enough to remember Anakin Skywalker, and the thought that he had become the sinister Vader was both shocking and disillusioning to them. And yet, the more they pondered it, the more it made sense. It explained why Vader had risked so much to help Princess Leia escape, why he had helped the Alliance destroy the Death Star and why he had gone to great lengths to prevent the destruction of Alderaan. Somehow the presence of his children in his life had brought out the humanity in Vader, had brought Anakin Skywalker back from the dead. *But could they truly trust him after all that he had done? How could they be certain that he would not slip again into Darkness?*

“Well, that certainly was....surprising,” General Reikan said at last.

Admiral Ackbar nodded slowly. “Indeed,” he replied. “To think we were sitting here talking to Darth Vader...”

“But he is no longer Darth Vader,” Mon Mothma reminded them. “Or else none of us would be alive right now, would we?”

None could admit that the man who had sat in their midst only a short time ago was nothing like the formidable Dark Lord they had all come to loathe and fear. No, he was quite the antithesis of Vader, as though Skywalker and Vader were opposites. Perhaps in a way they were.

"I think the fact that Padmé Amidala supports him says a great deal," Mothma went on to say. "I knew her very well, and I remember what a champion of justice she always was. Why, she was one of the founding members of this Alliance. Surely her judgment should count for something in this, gentlemen."

"Padmé Amidala is the wife of Anakin Skywalker," Dodonna reminded her. "Of course she supports him! I would expect nothing less."

"Amidala is not some weak minded, defenseless female who can be pushed around, General," Mothma retorted. "She has always been a woman of great intelligence and sound judgment. If she were not certain of her husband's redemption, I have no doubt that she'd not be with him right now."

"Or his children either for that matter," Ackbar spoke up. "We all know what a staunch supporter of this Alliance Princess Leia has been. Her opinion is not one that could easily be swayed, no matter that she and Skywalker are kin."

"I agree," Mothma replied. 'And let us not forget Obi-Wan Kenobi,' she pointed out. "As one of the last Jedi in the galaxy, his opinion should be considered as well. Reikan you told me yourself how involved he has been in Skywalker's redemption, and how he has been active in the training of his children."

General Reikan nodded. "Yes, he has indeed," he said. He sighed, and ran a hand over his grizzled chin. 'Clearly we are faced with a decision of monumental import,' he said to his comrades. "The fate of the galaxy depends upon it. If Skywalker is being completely honest with us, then we have before us an opportunity to swing the balance of power in our favor. If he is not..."

"Then we are all doomed," Ackbar finished. The four of them sat in silence once again, the decision before them weighing heavily upon them.

"Perhaps we ought to sleep on it," Dodonna suggested. "We have much to consider, and I don't think I need to point out to anyone here that whatever decision we make will affect the course of history."

"You're right there, Jan," Reikan said. "I think a good night's sleep is a fine idea, granted any of us will be able to sleep tonight," he put in with a smile.

"Shall we reconvene at 0800 hours then?" suggested Mon Mothma.

The others agreed, and so they parted company for the night, each preoccupied with the weighty matters at hand, each hoping that they would arrive at the right decision.

Star Destroyer Executor

Leia Skywalker stood in front of the large picture window in the suite she shared with her family gazing out at the massive array of Rebel ships. Unable to sleep, as was often the case with Leia, she stood in her nightgown, her long braids hanging down her back, looking at

each of the ships. In her mind she was telling herself that she was just doing what any good leader would do, taking a headcount of who had made it to the rendezvous. It seemed that most of the ships had made it past the Imperial blockade above Hoth; but there was one ship that was conspicuous in its absence: the *Millennium Falcon*.

Leia knew that particular ship well, and had spent the better part of an hour scanning the assembled ships. She had even surreptitiously done a scan of the ships that were not visible from her vantage point while the rest of her family slept. It was clear that the *Falcon* was not yet among the fleet.

Leia tried not to let this bother her, tried not to read too much into it. *He and Chewie probably just got a late start leaving Bespin*, she reasoned. *He's probably hung over and forgot where he parked that piece of junk*, she mused. But despite her best efforts to convince herself that Han was still on Bespin, the nagging feeling deep within her told her otherwise. *Maybe he's just not coming*, she reflected, hating herself for the way that particular thought made her feel. *Maybe he's finally had it with the Alliance and has gone off to seek his own destiny*.

The thought that Han had abandoned the Alliance without so much as a word to anyone angered Leia. But more than that, it hurt her, and it made her regret their last conversation. *He was trying to apologize, and what did I do? I pushed him away. Maybe I pushed him too hard this time*, she reflected. *Maybe I'll never see him again*.

"Leia? What are you doing up?"

Leia turned to see her brother standing there, his blond hair tousled from sleep.

"I can't sleep," she told him as Luke came and stood beside her.

"You're thinking about Han," he told her matter-of-factly.

Leia knew it would be foolish to deny it; Luke could read her like a book.

"Yes," she said. "Stupid I know," she hastened to add.

Luke shook his head. "Not stupid at all," he told her. "You love the guy, don't you?"

Leia frowned, wishing she could deny that she did, but knowing she'd only be fooling herself if she did. Luke would know better. "Yeah," she said quietly. "I guess I do."

Luke put his arm around her. "He'll be here," he said, knowing her silent fears. "Han may be a nerf herder, but he's a good hearted one," he told her with a smile.

Leia couldn't help but laugh at his comment. "I suppose so," she said. "I just wish I knew where I stood with him. The last time we talked didn't go so well."

"Han needs a good swift kick in the pants sometimes," Luke reminded her. "You know that. Maybe seeing that you are not so thrilled with him will force him to smarten up."

Leia snorted. "Yeah, sure it will," she said. "Thanks Luke. Thanks for trying to make me feel better. You're my best friend, you know that?"

Luke smiled. "Yeah, I know. And you're mine. Not to mention my favorite sister."

"I'm you're only sister, nerf herder," Leia teased, poking him in the ribs.

Luke laughed. “Yeah, well, that doesn’t matter. Come on, we should try to get some sleep. I have a feeling tomorrow will be a long day.”

Chapter 67

Chapter 67

Anakin passed a fitful night, his rest compromised by disturbing dreams. He did his best not to disturb his wife as she slept, but eventually his restlessness forced him from his bed. He left the bedroom and walked into the common area. Sitting down on the sofa, he leaned forward, resting his face in his hands. He could feel the tension filling him, drawing every muscle in his body into a series of tight knots.

Part of him wished that there wasn't so much resting on his shoulders. Part of him wished that his destiny was a simpler, more peaceful one. *But this is what I was born for*, he reflected, running his hands into his thick, tousled hair; *this is what I was meant to do*.

Anakin turned as he sensed Padmé entering the room. She walked over to him and sat down beside him.

"Can't sleep?" she asked, running her hand across his broad back.

"No," he replied. "I'm sorry if I woke you."

"You didn't," she told him, running her fingers through his hair. "I couldn't sleep either."

Anakin turned to look at her. "What if they say no?" he asked her. "What if they can't bring themselves to trust me?"

Padmé stroked his hair softly. "They will," she said. "They will see reason, Ani, I just know it."

Anakin sighed. "I hope you're right," he said, wincing as he straightened his back.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

"Just a bit of muscular strain," he told her. "I'll be okay."

Padmé brought her hands up to his shoulders and massaged them lightly. "You're in knots," she told him with a frown. "No wonder you can't sleep."

Anakin closed his eyes, melting under her touch. "That feels amazing," he purred.

Padmé smiled. "Good," she said as she positioned herself behind him on the sofa and went to work. "I think Obi-Wan's over doing it," she told him. "He's not looking well at all."

"Try to tell him that," Anakin muttered. "He's so damn stubborn he won't listen."

"Hmm, reminds me of someone else I know," she remarked, moving down his spine.

Anakin smiled. "You don't mean me, do you?"

"No, of course not," she replied. "You? Stubborn? Not a chance."

Anakin laughed. "You have very talented hands, milady," he said with a contented sigh.

Padmé leaned forward and kissed his ear. “So do you, my love,” she told him, causing Anakin to grin. “So do you.”

Anakin laughed. “Solo hasn’t arrived yet,” he told her. “Leia is upset, even though she’s trying to deny it.”

“Well, whether you like it or not, Leia cares for the man,” Padmé told him. “She’s bound to be concerned.”

Anakin snorted. “Probably still at the local drinking establishment,” he remarked.

“Ani, be nice,” she told him.

“I’m nice,” he replied, looking back at her with a smile.

Padmé shook her head. “When you want to be,” she said in response. She was silent for a moment. “I’m not sure I like the idea of Obi-Wan traveling alone,” she said.

“He’s not alone, Angel,” Anakin assured her. “He has two body guards with him.”

“Still,” she said, “I’ll feel better having him back here with us.”

“Me too,” Anakin admitted at last.

Planet Tatooine

Han and Chewbacca were pretty certain they knew where Bossk was taking them, but when they were roughly escorted off of the Trandoshan vessel and the twin suns of Tatooine assaulted their eyes, both had a sinking feeling. The Trandoshans had bound the wrists of their prisoners; having dealt with both Solo and his comrade before, they knew better than to underestimate them.

Han squinted up against the brilliant sky. *Jabba’s gonna be ticked*, he reflected as the Trandoshans shoved him and Chewbacca into a waiting transport. *How the hell are we gonna get out of this one?* He wondered miserably, looking at his friend.

“We have to find a way to contact Luke and Leia,” Chewbacca barked. “Or we’ll never get out off this planet again.”

“Yeah, easier said than done, pal,” Han replied.

“*Shut up, human scum*,” one of the aliens hissed, giving Han a rough shove, sending him sprawling onto the filthy deck of the transport. Han winced against the pain that filled him as his body made contact with one of the many pieces of abandoned droid that littered the deck. He didn’t want to let his captors know that they had injured him, however; and stood up as quickly as he could, gritting his teeth against the pain.

Chewbacca, however knew better, and moved to help his friend.

“I’m alright,” Han grunted, secretly grateful for his friend’s assistance. He’d had enough broken bones in his life to know what a cracked rib felt like; right now he was certain he had a few.

“*Enjoy the ride, maggots*,” the same surly alien told them as they found a place to sit amidst the junk piles. He sat down a short distance from them, never taking his yellow

reptilian eyes off of them.

Han did his best to get reasonably comfortable, which, he decided, was impossible under the present conditions. He closed his eyes, willing himself to master the pain he felt growing worse with each breath he drew. His thoughts ran straight to Leia, as he realized, despite his best efforts to deny it, that she had somehow become the focal point of his life. *I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner, sweetheart*, he thought despondently, *but I do love you, Leia... I just hope I get the chance to tell you some day.*

Star Destroyer Executor

Leia sat bolt upright in bed, her heart hammering within her chest. It hadn't been a nightmare that had shaken her so abruptly from her sleep; no, it had been a strong feeling of terror, of dread, as though someone close to her was in trouble. Closing her eyes, Leia brought her mind into oneness with the Force, seeking out the meaning of the feelings she had raging through her. *Brilliant sunshine, almost blinding in its intensity... sand, as far as the eye can see... a decrepit looking transport, slowly making its way over the dunes, creaking with age as it lumbers along...it is dark inside the transport, and it stinks of oil, sweat, and filth... a fearsome creature with the eyes of a serpent keeps watch over a pair of prisoners... one is a wookiee, and the other... the other is in pain... the other is... is...*

"Han!!" Leia gasps at last. *Han is in trouble... he is in pain... he needs me...*

Leia jumped out of bed and rushed over to the door of her room. She stopped as a hard dose of reality hit her. *What am I supposed to do now?* She thought anxiously. *How can I possibly help him now with all that is going on?* Leia clenched her fists with frustration as her mind raced for a way to get to Han. *I have to help him*, she thought desperately. *If I don't...*

Leia's thoughts were interrupted by a light knock on her door. She opened it at once, and was not at all surprised to see her brother standing there. She could see at once by the look in his eyes that he had sensed Han's pain as well.

"What are we going to do?" Leia asked anxiously.

"He's on Tatooine," Luke said matter-of-factly. "I recognize it."

Leia frowned. "Why there?" she asked.

"Because that's where Jabba the Hutt is," Luke told her, taking her by the shoulders. "The aliens who have him are bounty hunters, they have to be. They've brought Han and Chewie to Jabba to collect the bounty."

Leia's eyes grew wide with fear as she considered her brother's words. Jabba the Hutt was as notorious as he was greedy. Han had managed to dodge his minions for almost a year now; no doubt his anger with Han would be tremendous.

"What will he do to them?" Leia asked at last, her voice barely a whisper.

Luke frowned. "I don't know," he answered honestly. "But Jabba the Hutt isn't someone to mess with. He's the biggest gangster in the system, Leia. He's very powerful. Han should have paid him off when he had the chance," he said, shaking his head.

"But he stayed with the Alliance to help us," Leia said, guilt filling her for the many times she had coerced Han into staying just a little while longer. *He stayed because of me*, Leia

thought as a cold feeling spread through her. *He stayed because I made him feel guilty about wanting to leave...*

"We have to help him, Luke," Leia said, her eyes filling with tears at last. "We have to find a way to get him and Chewie out of there!"

Luke nodded, reflecting on how Han would have been debt free had he left when he'd planned too after their arrival at Yavin. But he had remained, and had saved Luke's life in the process. *We owe him*, he realized solemnly. *Many times over, we owe him.*

"We will," he said at last, pulling Leia into a hug. 'I promise you Leia, we'll find a way to save them both.'

"Save who?"

Both twins turned around to see their father standing before them, watching them closely. Luke and Leia looked at one another, wondering how their father would react to what they were planning to do.

"Answer me," Anakin asked, not liking his children's reticence.

"Han and Chewbacca," Luke said at last. "Leia and I both sense that they are in tremendous danger."

Anakin frowned. "What danger?" he asked, looking at Leia.

"Bounty hunters have them," Leia told her father. "Both Luke and I saw them, Dad. He owes Jabba a lot of money and has had a bounty on his head for months now."

"Solo was foolish to tangle with the likes of Jabba the Hutt," Anakin remarked. "The Hutts are ruthless and without mercy."

"Have you had dealings with them yourself?" Luke asked.

"Unfortunately yes," Anakin replied. 'My mother and I were owned by the wife of Jabba.' He frowned as he remembered the cruelty and brutality he and his mother had suffered while being owned by the vile Gardula the Hutt. He looked at his children. "Solo is in a great deal of danger if he owes them money. There is nothing they love more."

"He needs our help," Leia said. "We can't just let him be enslaved or worse! We have to go to Tatooine and..."

"Have you forgotten about what is happening right now, Leia?" Anakin asked. "The very future of the galaxy is hanging in the balance. I'm sorry to say it, but Han Solo's fate is less important than that of an entire galaxy."

Leia was stung by her father's seemingly callous remark; but she could see his point. "I will go if I have to," she said. "Luke will help me."

"Out of the question!" Anakin retorted hotly. "You two have no idea what sort of villain Jabba is! He would not hesitate to take both of you as prisoners if it meant he could make money from it. Neither of you are ready to face a foe as powerful as he is."

"Well we can't just let Han rot in Jabba's palace," Luke said. "I owe him my life, Dad. If it hadn't been for him I would have died in the trench over the Death Star, I know it. He has

been a good friend to both of us, and a valuable member of the Alliance.”

Anakin sighed. “I’m not questioning that, Luke,” he said, doing his best to remain patient. ‘But we simply cannot go rushing off to Tatooine right now, not with the fate of the galaxy about to be decided. We are at the center of something huge here,’ he said, looking from Luke to Leia. “This opportunity must be seized now, for it may never come again.”

“I will go, then,” Leia said. “I am willing to take the risk if it means saving Han’s life.”

“Are you mad?” Anakin asked hotly. “Should I tell you of the atrocities that are committed against women in Jabba’s custody? There is no way, Leia, simply...”

“I’m an adult,” she said, swallowing her fear and standing up to her father. “You can’t stop me.”

Anakin met his daughter’s eyes, seeing that she meant business. He muttered a curse under his breath as he began to see that he had been forced into a corner.

“You realize that this is emotional blackmail,” he said at last, folding his arms over his chest.

“Maybe so,” Leia admitted, folding her arms as well. “But I will do whatever it takes to help Han. I know you don’t like him, but I happen to care a great deal about him.”

“Yes, I know,” Anakin muttered. He sighed, and ran a hand through his hair as he considered how to handle this most delicate situation. Part of him relished the opportunity to get revenge on Jabba for all that he and his mother had been put through by him and his wife. *Revenge is not the Jedi way*, a voice inside of him reminded him; *but if it just happened to work out that way, was that a bad thing?*

Anakin walked over to the comm. station and contacted the bridge. “Piett, this is Skywalker. Plot a course to Tatooine, maximum speed. I want a squadron of clones ready for surface action as soon as we get there.” He clicked off the communication and looked up at his children. “Happy now?” he asked.

Leia smiled and came over to him. “Yes,” she said, hugging him tightly. “Thanks Dad. You’re the best.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Anakin said, hugging her back. “I just hope Solo is grateful after all this.”

“I have a feeling this entire experience will change Han forever,” Luke said.

“I certainly hope so,” Anakin said. He glanced at the wall chrono. ‘Well, I’ll not get any more sleep tonight,’ he remarked. “I’m going up to the bridge.”

“I’ll join you,” Leia said. She followed her father half way across the room and then stopped, looking down at her nightgown. “Well, maybe I’ll get changed first,” she added.

Anakin stopped too. “Yes, maybe I ought to do that too,” he said, realizing he was still wearing his sleep pants. “I’ll meet you there,” he said as he and Leia returned to their respective rooms. Luke merely smiled, and then went back to bed.

Chapter 68

Chapter 68

Han and Chewbacca were escorted at blaster point into the throne room of Jabba the Hutt. Neither of them was able to see for a moment or two as their eyes adjusted from the brilliant sunlight, but there was no mistaking where they were. The stench of a hundred different alien bodies, of spoiled food and alcohol permeated the very walls of the room; the sound of raucous laughter and rude bodily emissions was heard from every corner. As their eyes adjusted to the dimness, they found themselves standing at the foot of the massive dais on which reclined the repulsive pile of flesh that was Jabba the Hutt.

"So, Han my boy," Jabba rumbled. "We meet again at last."

"I was on my way to pay you back, Jabba," Han began at once. "But I got a little side tracked. You didn't need to send that bastard Bossk after us."

"I was getting tired of waiting," Jabba responded testily. "So where is it? Where's my money, Solo?"

"I... I don't have it with me," Han replied. "Your hired goons sort of took me by surprise."

"I see," Jabba replied, his large eyes narrowing. "Then you'll have to work off your debt, Solo."

"How do you propose I do that?" Han retorted. "I'm not exactly cut out to be a dancing girl."

Jabba was not amused at Han's attempt to be humorous, and continued to stare at him unyieldingly. "Have no fear, Solo," he replied. "There's plenty of work to be had around here for a strong young slave such as yourself." He turned to Chewbacca. "Not to mention the mighty Chewbacca," he added. "Slavery is something he is accustomed to, isn't that right?"

Chewbacca growled in fury and tried to lunge at Jabba, but the Gamorrean guard who stood closely by him yanked him back by the large manacle around Chewie's neck.

"There are alternatives to slavery, should you find the thought of it too distasteful," Jabba continued once the wookiee had been properly contained. "The Rancor is always hungry."

The motley group of aliens Jabba kept as courtiers laughed uproariously at his comment. Han and Chewie exchanged a look of utter hopelessness.

"Take them away," Jabba commanded with a wave of one great flabby appendage. "Lock them up while I decide upon a fitting job for each of them."

Han and Chewbacca were brutally pulled and pushed out of the throne room and down a narrow set of stone steps at the end of a corridor. The hall way was very narrow as they passed by a series of cells, from whence the moans and screams of the denizens of this most horrific prison could be heard. The stench was almost overwhelming, at Han had to cover his mouth and nose as he gagged in response to it. Finally the two were shoved into a dank, dark

cell, which smelled equally foul and was scattered with debris that neither Han nor Chewie wanted to know the source of.

"We're really in it deep now, pal," Han said as he peered into the darkness, looking for somewhere to sit down. The pain in his ribs was excruciating, and he was beginning to feel lightheaded. "We never should have left Bespin."

"But the Alliance was expecting us," Chewie pointed out. "We had no choice."

"Yeah," Han replied as he sat down on a stone bench. It was damp, but at least it afforded him a place to rest. 'Wait a minute,' Han muttered as a thought stuck him. "If the Alliance is expecting us, and we don't show up, then maybe they'll realize something has happened to us!"

"Or maybe they'll think we just took off," Chewie replied. "Like you told Leia we were going to do one of these days."

Han frowned, realizing that Chewbacca, as always, had a valid point. How many times had he told Leia that he needed to leave, that he'd had enough, that today was definitely the day he was going to pay off Jabba....and yet he hadn't left, he had always managed to find some reason why he couldn't leave, while deep down inside he knew that she was the real reason for his delay.

"Maybe," he admitted at last. "But maybe not. There's at least a chance," he said, trying to convince himself as much as Chewbacca.

Chewbacca didn't reply; he didn't want to dash Han's hopes. But he realized that the Skywalkers had more to contend with at the moment than the possibility that he and Han had run into trouble.

Star Destroyer Executor

Padmé woke up alone. She got dressed and then walked out into the common room where she found Luke alone eating breakfast.

"Where is everyone?" she asked.

Luke looked up at his mother. "On the bridge," he told her. "We're on our way to Tatooine."

Padmé frowned. "Why?" she asked simply.

"Han and Chewbacca have been captured by bounty hunters," Luke explained. "They're being taken to Jabba the Hutt."

"And your father is taking this vessel to rescue them?" Padmé asked incredulously.

Luke nodded. "Yeah," he said. "I half believe it myself. Leia sort of....talked him into it."

Padmé lifted an eyebrow. "I see," she said. "I hope she thought to contact Mon Mothma before leaving the fleet."

"She did," Luke replied. "I think they were pretty surprised that Dad would try to help Han and Chewie like this."

"Maybe it will help them to believe that he has changed," she said. 'I'm going to the bridge too,' she said. "Are you coming?"

Luke nodded as he downed the last of his juice. "Right with you, Mom."

Anakin stood on the bridge of the mighty vessel, watching out the view screen as they raced through the galaxy. *Tatooine...* the thought of returning to his home planet filled Anakin with mixed feelings. He had not set foot on the sands of the desert planet since the time his mother died. That night still gave him nightmares, and the memories of it were part of the reason he had never returned. But now he would.... and why? To save the life of a man he despised, a man who probably deserved whatever fate Jabba had in store for him, a man who had somehow captured the heart of his only daughter.

Anakin turned and looked at Leia as she walked around the bridge, doing her best to preoccupy herself with learning the function of each of the stations and getting to know the men who manned them. *She's a natural leader*, Anakin thought with pride as he noticed how easily she spoke with the men while still maintaining a professional distance with them. *She was born to lead, like her mother, like me.* Yet, despite the appearance she maintained to the men, Anakin knew that she was worried. He had come to know his daughter very well since the time they had been reunited. The bond between them was a powerful one.

Leia could sense that her father was watching her, and she turned her eyes to his. When he smiled at her, she returned his smile, expressing her gratitude for what he was doing for the man she loved.

"ETA to Tatooine?" Pielt asked.

"Four point seven hours, sir," one of the men replied at once.

A look of distress crossed Leia's face briefly at this. *Four and a half hours is a long time when you're in danger*, she reflected grimly, *when you're in pain.*

Padmé and Luke entered the bridge, both impressed by the efficiency with which the men conduct themselves. Anakin turned to see his wife and son on the bridge and walked over to join them.

"I understand we're en route to Tatooine," Padmé said.

Anakin nodded. "Seems Captain Solo has landed in some trouble with the Hutt."

"And you decided to help him?" Padmé replied.

"Well, it was either this or Leia would have taken it upon herself to affect a rescue," he told her. "And I was not about to allow that to happen."

"No, of course not," Padmé said. She linked her arm through his and reached up to kiss his cheek. "You're a good father," she told him.

Anakin felt a little embarrassed that Padmé had chosen to show her affection for him at this precise moment, with the men on the bridge watching. *Well at least they can see that I'm no longer Darth Vader*, he reasoned as he put his arm around Padmé. "Thanks," he said. "I suppose I shouldn't be surprised that she managed to talk me into it. She's had me wrapped around my finger since we met on the Death Star."

Padmé laughed. “That doesn’t surprise me in the least,” she replied.

Jabba’s Palace— Planet Tatooine

Chewbacca shuffled through the throne room, ankles manacled together, carrying a tray of drinks. The ignominy of the situation was almost more than the proud creature could bear; but he knew that any resistance would only end in punishment. Chewbacca could be patient when he needed to be; and the situation he and Han found themselves in clearly called for patience. An opportunity would present itself, of that Chewbacca was certain. In the mean time, he would bide his time, and do his best to keep the young one from doing anything stupid. *Easier said than done*, Chewbacca reflected as he served his tray of drinks to the various creatures that filled the throne room. *Han was nothing if not impulsive... not to mention pig headed...*

As for Han, he’d been put to work in the basement, where he was assigned to repairing the palace’s droids and mechanical devices. It at least kept his mind off of how desperate a situation he was in. Han enjoyed working with his hands, and he was good at it; so thus far he had managed to avoid being punished. However, unlike Chewbacca, he was not a patient man. He was constantly looking for a way to escape, but so far no opportunities had presented themselves. *I’ll never get out of here if I’m stuck down here*, he reasoned as he packed up the tools he’d been using. *I have to get up to the throne room; I have to get closer to the surface...*

While Han wracked his brain thinking of an excuse to go upstairs, Chewbacca entered the repair shop.

“I brought you some supper,” he told Han, setting a tray down on the work bench where Han had just been busy at work.

“Thanks,” he said, looking at the extremely unappetizing tray of slop. “I think,” he added wryly.

“I need to get upstairs,” Han told his friend between mouthfuls. “We’ll never get out of here if I’m stuck down here.”

“I may have an idea,” Chewie said. “The food replicator has been malfunctioning a lot. You could come up to repair it.”

“Yeah,” Han replied, taking hope. “Good thinking, pal! I’ll come up tonight when most of them have gone to sleep. Who knows, we might get lucky.”

“I hope so,” Chewbacca replied. “I’m getting pretty tired of serving drinks to these low lifes.”

“Hey, at least we’re still alive pal,” Han reminded his friend. “That’s something.”

“I guess so,” Chewbacca replied. “I’d better get back upstairs before someone starts complaining about being thirsty,” he said with a roll of his eyes.

Han laughed. “Okay, I’ll be upstairs as soon as night falls. Be ready for anything, pal.”

Chewbacca nodded his understanding and then left Han to return to his own duties.

Chapter 69

Chapter 69

Night had almost fallen when Han made his way up to the throne room. He was met on the stairs by a surly looking guard, who blocked his way. Han faced the creature as calmly as he could; giving him a stare that normally would make an opponent shrink away.

"Where do you think *you're* going?" the creature demanded.

"Food replicator is acting up," Han said, indicating the tool box that he had brought with him. "I'm going to fix it."

The guard considered this, and, realizing that food was something nobody wanted to do without, let Han pass.

Han breathed a sigh of relief as he continued on his way, reaching the main floor of the palace in short order. Chewbacca was there waiting for him, and showed him to the replicator.

"I thought there'd be more of them asleep by now," Han commented as he noticed a great deal of activity still going on in the throne room. "What's going on? Another freakin' party?"

"A new dancing girl," Chewbacca told him.

"What happened to the old one?"

"The Rancor was hungry."

Han shuddered as he considered the horrible fate of the young twilek female who mere hours ago had been entertaining the motley crew of drunken aliens.

"I guess my idea is shot to Hell then," Han muttered as he got to work on the replicator. "I'll make sure this thing needs more attention tomorrow night so we can..." Han stopped as he and Chewbacca heard something above the normal din of the partiers. "What is that?" he asked. "Sand storm?"

Chewbacca tilted his head to one side. "No," he said. "It's footsteps, plenty of them. They're coming this way."

"What do you mean?" Han asked, but before Chewie could reply, a century of storm troopers burst into the room, blasters at the ready. Aliens from all corners screamed and tried to escape the invading force, but to no avail; they were shot instantly. The others froze where they were, having seen what had befallen those foolhardy enough to try to escape.

Jabba, who had been dozing, was abruptly awoken by the noise, and snapped open his eyes only to see his throne room swarming with a sea of white armored troops.

"What is the meaning of this!?" he demanded angrily. "On whose authority are you trespassing here?"

"My authority," said Anakin as he emerged from the throng of clones.

Jabba looked at the imposing figure before him, recognizing the trappings of a Jedi Knight. "You have no authority here, Jedi scum," he growled.

"I beg to differ," Anakin replied. "I am here as commander of the Imperial Star Destroyer *Executor*," he said. "You have kidnapped two members of my crew. I want them back."

From their safe vantage point, Han and Chewbacca watched the entire scene in shocked disbelief. Chewbacca looked at Han. "Maybe he's not as bad as you seem to think he is."

Han frowned, not willing to admit that Chewie was right. *I'll never hear the end of this...*

"Crew members?" Jabba replied. "I have no imperial troops here, besides the ones you so thoughtfully brought with you," he added sourly.

"Don't play games with me, Jabba," Anakin retorted, taking a step closer to the dais. "I know your kind very well, and I know that you have Solo and the wookiee Chewbacca here in this palace. Don't think for a moment that I won't tear this hell hole apart to find them."

Jabba merely smiled. "You don't scare me," he retorted. "I'm not afraid of the Jedi, that is, if you even are a Jedi. Didn't your kind get wiped out twenty years ago?"

It was Anakin's turn to smile. He lifted a hand and sent Jabba hurtling backward against the wall behind him. Pieces of ceiling fell down around him at the great impact, and more aliens shrieks were heard from the cowering masses.

"Not all of us," Anakin said simply as he watched the fear blossoming in Jabba's eyes as he struggled to regain his composure.

"Now where are they?" Anakin asked his eyes as cold as a glacier. "Or do I need to give you another demonstration?"

Jabba looked closely at Anakin as he was helped back onto his dais by a veritable army of lackeys. "Who are you?" he asked, the curiosity getting the better of him. No Jedi he had ever encountered had such power.

"I'm surprised you don't recognize me, Jabba," Anakin retorted. "Considering you and your charming wife made much of my childhood a living hell."

At this Jabba's eyes widened. "Anakin Skywalker," he said, recognizing him at last. "So, we meet again. Tell me, how is your dear mother? She always was so accommodating, so compliant. Never complained even when asked to do the most demeaning of things."

Rage filled Anakin, dark, potent rage. Jabba felt his throat begin to constrict and his hands flew to his neck as he sputtered for air.

"You are not fit to utter her name," Anakin replied coldly, watching the vile gangster as he choked and sputtered. "Go back to Hell now, Jabba, where you belong," he added, squeezing just a tiny bit tighter, just enough to crush the larynx of the huge beast. Jabba gasped his last breath, and his eyes glazed over, his great slime coated tongue protruding from his mouth.

Anakin turned to his troops. "Find them," he said simply.

"We're here!" Han called out, emerging with Chewbacca from their hiding spot. The scene he had just witnessed had shaken him deeply. He knew that Anakin Skywalker was a

formidable man; but he had no idea of just how formidable. Until now. The ease with which Anakin had dispatched Jabba had been terrifying to witness, despite the fact that it meant freedom.

Anakin looked first at Han and then at Chewbacca. He could see how shaken Solo was, and it secretly pleased him. *Maybe now you'll know who you're dealing with*, he thought to himself.

"Are you injured?" he asked.

"No, nothing worth mentioning," Han said. Chewbacca, however, proceeded to tell Anakin all about Han's cracked ribs. Anakin nodded his understanding and looked back at Solo. 'The *Executor* is in orbit,' he told him. "You can receive medical attention when we return."

"Thanks," Han said, at a total loss for words for the first time in his thirty years. "Really, thanks a lot. I'm in your debt."

Anakin lifted an eyebrow at this comment, but did not reply. "Let's go," he said.

The clones held the aliens at blaster point while Anakin, Han and Chewbacca left the room and found their way to the exit. They then made their retreat also, leaving a stunned and terrified mob to deal with the shocking turn of events that they had witnessed.

Anakin was quiet and sullen on the shuttle trip back to the *Executor*. Han had wanted to speak to him, to express his thanks and try to make peace; but it was obvious that Anakin wanted to be left alone, so Han kept his distance.

Anakin's family as well as Admiral Piett was waiting in the shuttle bay when they arrived back at the ship. Leia, unable to hold back her feelings any longer, ran to meet Han.

"I was so worried," she cried as she hugged him gently.

"I'm okay, sweetheart," Han told her. "Thanks to your dad. He was something else down there, scared the crap out of me."

Leia smiled. "He does tend to do that to people sometimes," she said. "Come on; let's get you to the infirmary."

Padmé and Luke had noticed immediately that Anakin was not himself, and both were concerned. Luke decided that his mother was the best one to get him to talk about what was bothering him, and accompanied a rather reluctant Chewbacca to the infirmary along with Han and Leia.

"Everything under control?" Anakin asked Piett.

"Yes sir," Piett replied. "I gave orders to return to the Rebel fleet as soon as your shuttle arrived. I take it things went smoothly down on the planet?"

Anakin nodded. "Jabba the Hutt won't be harassing anyone any more," he said simply. "I'm going to my quarters to wash off the filth from that place," he added. "I'll join you on the bridge shortly."

"Very well, sir," Piett said.

Anakin turned to his wife and gave her a smile and a quick kiss on the cheek. Padmé decided to accompany him back to their quarters to try to get him to open up to her. She watched him as they rode in the turbo lift. Padmé knew her Anakin well; his body language spoke volumes to her. *What happened down there, Ani?* She wondered anxiously. *Why are you so withdrawn?*

Finally, in the privacy of their quarters, Padmé voiced her concerns.

“Tell me what’s wrong,” she said simply.

Anakin, who was preparing to get into the shower, stopped unbuttoning his shirt to look at her. “Why do you think something is wrong?”

Padmé frowned. “Because I know you,” she said, walking over and helping him. ‘Because I know that you are upset about something.’ She looked up at him. “What happened down there?”

Anakin did not respond at once, removing his shirt and setting it on the bed. “The clones invaded the palace,” he began, still not meeting her eyes. “And we took Solo and the wookiee. It was relatively easy.”

Padmé took his face in her hands and tilted it down so that he had no choice but to look her in the eyes. “What else?”

Anakin frowned as the memory of what he had done, the memory of how he had felt flashed through his mind. “I... I killed Jabba,” he told her.

Padmé nodded. “I’m sure it was necessary,” she said, hoping that she was right. “He was a dangerous criminal, Ani. You were only doing what you needed to do.”

“I’m not so sure,” he replied, casting his eyes downward. ‘He was taunting me about my mother,’ he told her quietly. “And I lost my temper. I used the Force to crush his windpipe, just like I used to do when I was Darth Vader.” He looked up at her, his blue eyes troubled. “I used the anger I felt to destroy him, Padmé! I used the Dark Side to get revenge!”

Padmé did not reply at once, for his words both surprised and upset her. “To be angry is to be human,” she said, remembering how she’d said the very same thing to him on that terrible day so long ago when Shmi had been killed by the Tusken Raiders. Anakin had gone insane with rage on that day, slaughtering the entire village of tuskens, men, women and children, in revenge for his mother’s death.

“I don’t want to go there again, Padmé,” he said, his voice full of emotion and fear. “I don’t want the dark side to claim me again!”

“It won’t!” she averred, stroking his face. ‘I won’t let it, and neither will Luke and Leia! Jabba made you angry, you had a human reaction. I *know* you are no longer Darth Vader,’ she told him vehemently. “But I also know that not so very long ago you were. You have made a remarkable, even miraculous turn around, Anakin. It is not surprising that you still have an occasional slip.”

Anakin appreciated his wife’s words, even if the nagging feeling of fear was not alleviated by them.

"You're not perfect, Anakin," she reminded him gently. "I know sometimes you expect yourself to be, but you aren't. No one is."

"I know that, Padmé," Anakin responded. "I suppose it's just been too recently that I was Darth Vader in every way. I never want to be him again."

"And you won't," she assured him. "The Dark Side will never take you from me again; Palpatine will never take you from me again. You are stronger now, Ani, wiser, and have learned from your mistakes. Don't be so hard on yourself if once in a while you are human."

Anakin smiled, and pulled her into his arms. "How did you get so wise?" he asked her.

Padmé ran her hands down to his bare chest. "Must be all the Jedi I associate with," she told him.

Anakin laughed. "Perhaps," he said, kissing her brow. "Or perhaps you are simply a remarkable woman."

"Maybe so," she said.

"I'm going to have a shower," he said, releasing her. "Care to join me?" he asked with a grin.

Padmé laughed. "Don't you think the bridge crew would wonder about us if we were both absent?"

"Let them wonder," he said, kissing her softly. "They have to have something to gossip about."

"I see," she said, smiling at him. "Well in that case, I would love to join you."

Anakin smiled, and pulled her closer to him again.

Imperial Palace— Coruscant

The Emperor Palpatine sat in his garden, staring vacantly into the distance. His sleep the previous night had been disturbed by a tremendous tremor in the Force, a powerful surge of Darkness that had shaken him deeply. *Lord Vader is angry, very angry*, he thought.

Palpatine had begun to have serious doubts about Vader, questioning his true allegiance. The fact that Vader still desired his wife troubled Palpatine, for she represented a weakness in him, and always had.

But the surge of darkness that he had sensed coursing through Vader was undeniable, and it puzzled Palpatine. *Perhaps it is merely lust he feels for Amidala*, he reasoned. *Just as Ferreus had felt for the whores whose company he kept...* If that were the case, then Amidala's presence in his life could possibly work to the advantage of the Dark Side. Lust, after all, was a dark emotion, an emotion of power, unlike love, which was one of weakness and compliance.

Vader had been most insistent during their last communication that he had rejected the Dark Side; so *why did the Dark Side tremble with fury? Why was Vader so filled with anger that it resonated through the Force like a dark tidal wave?* Palpatine smiled. *It seems you are not as sure of yourself as you would like me to believe, Lord Vader*, he thought with

satisfaction. *I will be waiting for you to return to me, my friend... it is only a matter of time now.*

Chapter 70

Chapter 70

Anakin made his way to the bridge, where he was informed that the Alliance had made contact with them.

"It seems that General Kenobi and Master Yoda arrived at the command ship several hours ago," Piett informed him.

"Good," Anakin replied, relieved to hear that Obi-Wan had arrived safely. "ETA to the rendezvous?" he asked.

"Another twelve hours sir," Piett replied. "Enough time for you to get some sleep," he added with a smile.

"How observant of you to notice I need some," Anakin remarked wryly. "Alert me when the Alliance makes contact again."

"Of course sir," Piett replied. He stopped as a thought occurred to him. "Uh, sir?"

Anakin turned around to face him. "Yes?"

"I know this question may sound a little... unusual," Piett began, rubbing the back of his neck nervously. "But I'm just wondering — how do you wish the men to address you?" he asked.

Anakin frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Well," Piett began tentatively, "if you are planning on acting the part of Darth Vader in order to gain the trust of the emperor, then should we use that name?"

I hadn't thought of that, Anakin reflected. The thought of using that hated name again made his blood run cold. But if he were to make Palpatine believe that he was truly Vader, then part of that persona included the Sith name Palpatine had given him twenty years earlier.

"I suppose so," Anakin replied at last. 'As much as I hate the thought of it,' he added. "But there can't be any chance of the emperor discovering our plan, so Vader I must be for all intents and purposes."

"I'd have to agree," Piett responded. "It would be prudent not to use the name Skywalker at least until you have dealt with the emperor."

Dealt with him... that's quite a euphemism, Anakin reflected. "Perhaps it is time we began our little charade," he said. "No doubt the emperor is anxious to find a new apprentice," he added.

Piett nodded. "Yes, no doubt. Will you contact him soon, then?"

"Once I learn where things stand with the Alliance," Anakin replied. "Then I will contact him. I only hope they have decided to join forces, or else this plan of ours will be rather

difficult to put into effect.”

“Difficult, but not impossible,” Piett replied. “After all, this is the mightiest vessel in the fleet, sir.”

“Yes, it is,” Anakin replied. “But I would feel better knowing I had the support of the Rebel fleet behind us.”

“Yes, of course,” Piett concurred.

A wave of fatigue washed over Anakin and he rubbed his eyes tiredly. “I’m going to my quarters,” he said. *And will hopefully sleep*, he thought to himself. “The bridge is yours, Piett.”

“Yes sir,” Piett replied. “Sleep well.”

Anakin returned to his quarters, where the rest of his family had already retired. Despite his most vehement protestations, Han had been kept over night in the infirmary to ensure that his ribs were healing properly.

Padmé was sleeping when Anakin entered their bedroom. He watched her for a moment as he got undressed, and then saw her smile in her sleep, making him wonder what she was dreaming. Sometimes her dreams were so vivid that they invaded his. He focused his mind on hers, trying to see what it was that was making her smile. But before he could determine what it was, Padmé awoke, and opened her eyes, as though she sensed that he was watching her.

“Did I wake you?” he asked as he climbed into bed beside her.

Padmé turned on her side to look at him. “No,” she said.

“What were you dreaming just now?” he asked, running a finger down the side of her face. “You were smiling in your sleep.”

“Was I?” she asked.

Anakin nodded. “Do you remember what you were dreaming?”

“Yes I do,” she said. “I dreamed we had another baby.”

Anakin raised his eyebrows in surprise. “Really?” he asked. “Is that something you think about?”

“Sometimes,” she said. “Sometimes I think it might be nice to have another child, one that we could raise ourselves.”

Anakin nodded. “It would be,” he said. He smiled as a thought struck him. “Padmé, are you trying to tell me something?”

Padmé shook her head. “No,” she said. ‘I’m not pregnant, Ani,’ she said quietly. “I thought I might be, but I’m not.”

“I’m actually surprised it hasn’t happened,” Anakin replied with a smile.

A frown creased Padmé’s brow. “I just hope those meds I took for all those years hasn’t made it impossible for me to conceive again,” she said.

That thought hadn't occurred to Anakin. Doctor Deese's report had not mentioned anything about infertility; but that did not mean it wasn't a possibility. After all, at that point they were mostly concerned about her memory loss. "Well, if that's something you're concerned about, perhaps we can find out for sure," he suggested at last. "The doctor I contacted on Polis Massa may be able to tell us. She has read your entire medical file."

"I'm almost afraid to know," she said, "but I suppose if we want to have another child, we need to."

"I will contact her as soon as we've straightened things out with the Alliance," Anakin said.

"Okay," she said through a yawn. She snuggled up close to him as he drew her into his embrace. "Good night, Ani," she said as she kissed his chin.

"Goodnight Angel," he replied as he kissed the top of her head. "Sleep well."

Executor Infirmary

Han Solo tried to get comfortable in the narrow cot, but it wasn't easy. *Still, it beats the hell out of the stink hole I was in on Tatooine...* he reasoned as he turned onto his side.

Having had his ribs attended to, and a hot shower, which Leia had told him he most definitely needed, Han felt like a new man. Still, something was bothering him, and he hated to admit what it was: his conscience.

A conscience had always been an inconvenience for men like Han; but being at heart a decent person, he could not deny its existence or its insistence on occasion. This was such an occasion.

Leia had told him that she had loved him more than a week earlier; and he had never responded in kind to her. He had even gone to lengths to make her think otherwise, with his cool, dispassionate attitude. He knew that Leia had gone to great lengths to convince her father to go to Tatooine to rescue him and Chewie; there was certainly no love lost between him and Anakin Skywalker, and no doubt Leia had pulled out all the stops to get him to help Han. *She must really love me*, Han thought. *And how have I repaid her love? By being a class one jackass...*

Han closed his eyes as the meds he'd been given earlier started to kick in. He was almost asleep when the door to the infirmary slid open, letting bright light from the corridor flood into the dimly lit recovery room. Han opened his eyes, squinting against the sudden assault of light, and was surprised to see none other than Leia approaching his bed. She wore a dressing gown over her nightgown, and her long hair was loose, hanging down past her waist.

"Hey good looking," he murmured sleepily. "Come here often?"

Leia smiled at his cheekiness and pulled up a chair beside his bed. "Not if I can help it," she replied. "You?"

"Only under duress," he replied with a weak smile. "What are you doing here in the middle of the night?"

"I just wanted to check on you," she said, averting her eyes from his and straightening his blanket. "I know how much you hate medi-droids."

“Yeah, I sure do,” he said, suddenly feeling awkward with her. He knew what he wanted to say to her, what he needed to say; so why were the words so hard to utter? ‘Listen, Leia,’ he began, propping himself up on one elbow. “I want to apologize for the way I talked to you back on Bespin,” he said. “I was a real jackass, a real jerk... and I’m sorry.”

“We already had this conversation, Han,” Leia reminded him. “Remember?”

“Uh, yeah....you’re right,” he said nervously. He hesitated before continuing, trying to work up the courage to say what he needed to say. “I had a lot of time to think when I was a guest at Jabba’s pleasure palace,” he said at last with a wry smile.

Leia raised her eyebrows. “Oh?” she said. “What about?”

“You,” he said.

“Me? What about me?”

She’s not going to make this easy for me, is she?

“Well, uh, I guess I’m trying to say that I came to realize how important you are to me,” he said at last, surprising himself with the depth of the emotion behind his words. “I was afraid I was never going to see you again, and never get the chance to tell you something I should have told you a long time ago.”

“And what is that?” Leia prodded, trying not to smile.

“Come on, Leia,” he replied awkwardly. “You need me to spell it out?”

“Yes I do,” she retorted, not giving an inch. “Say it.”

“Okay, okay,” he relented at last. “I love you, Leia. There, I said it. I love you.”

“Wow, twice!” she said with a grin. “I’m impressed!”

Han was about to offer a curt reply when he saw that she was teasing him, and simply laughed along with her. “Well, when your life is on the line, you come up with some crazy notions,” he said.

“So loving me is crazy?” she said. “I’m a pretty lovable person,” she added, remembering his response to her declaration of love.

Han laughed again. “Yeah, you sure as hell are,” he said, reaching out and taking her hand. ‘Come here,’ he said, pulling her closer. “I’ve wanted to do this for a long time.”

Chapter 71

Chapter 71

Anakin closed the bedroom door quietly behind him as he entered the common area. Sitting down on the sofa, he set his cloak down beside him as he pulled on his boots. He was just standing up when the door to the suite opened. Anakin looked over and was stunned to see his daughter entering the room. Judging by the look on her face, Leia was just as surprised to see her father up so early.

“What are you doing?” he asked simply, looking at her. “Where have you been in your nightgown?”

“I...I just wanted to check on Han,” she explained.

Anakin narrowed his eyes, knowing that she was hiding something. “And for how long were you checking on him?” he asked.

“Just a few minutes,” she lied. “I’ve only been gone a...”

“Don’t lie to me,” Anakin retorted, cutting her off. “You’ve been there all night, haven’t you?” he demanded, his anger growing.

Leia did not reply, and averted her eyes from her father’s stern gaze.

“Answer me!”

“So what if I was?” Leia said at last, looking back at him. “Nothing happened, I just missed him, and I wanted to see him. What’s wrong with that?”

“What’s wrong with that?” Anakin repeated, his voice rising. “You spent the night in your nightgown with a man you’re not married to, and you ask me what is wrong with that??”

“You make it sound like we did something wrong,” Leia retorted, starting to get angry with Anakin. “All we did was talk.”

Anakin raised an eyebrow. “Somehow I doubt that,” he retorted. “I know Solo’s type, Leia. He’s not the type of man to spend the night simply talking with a woman.”

“Well then I suppose you don’t know him very well, do you?” she responded hotly. “Why did you even bother to rescue him, Dad? You so obviously hate him!”

“I did it for you,” he said as he donned his cloak. ‘Not that you’re grateful,’ he added. “I’m going to the bridge. Get dressed. It’s not fitting for a young woman to be seen in her night clothes by half the crew.”

Anakin stormed out of the room before Leia had a chance to respond. She turned on her heel and stomped off to her room, determined not to allow her father to ruin the joy she felt at hearing Han say the words she had waited for months to hear him say. *You don’t know him like I do*, she kept telling herself. *You just see what you want to see.*

Anakin stepped into the turbolift where he was met by Firmus Piett.

“Good morning sir,” Piett said. “Did you have a good rest?”

Anakin nodded.

Piett could see that Anakin was in a foul mood, and hesitated before speaking again. “Er... something amiss, sir?”

Anakin sighed and looked at Piett. “Do you have any children, Piett?”

Piett was rather taken aback by the question. “Yes sir,” he replied at last. “I have three daughters.”

Anakin’s eyes widened. “*Three* daughters?” he asked incredulously. “How do you manage? I can’t even deal with one.”

Piett smiled. “Well, they do make life interesting,” he replied.

“How old are they?” Anakin asked.

“Ylla, the eldest, is eighteen,” Piett answered. “Mina is fifteen and Deirdre is twelve.”

“Wow,” Anakin said, shaking his head. “You’ve certainly got your hands full there.”

“Of course I don’t get to see them nearly as often as I’d like,” Piett replied. “They’re growing up so fast and I’m missing a lot of it.”

Anakin nodded. “Of course,” he said, realizing that the life of a naval officer meant long weeks away from home and family. “Why don’t you bring your family here?” he suggested after a moment’s consideration.

Piett’s face registered his surprise at Anakin’s suggestion. “You mean here? On board this ship?”

“Yes, that’s exactly what I mean,” Anakin replied.

“But... that is against every regulation in the book, sir,” Piett replied.

“Every *imperial* regulation,” Anakin pointed out. “Need I remind you that this ship is no longer a part of the Empire? We don’t have to govern ourselves by their rules. Besides, I have my family on board, why shouldn’t you?”

Piett was quite taken aback by Anakin’s response. “Well, if you’re sure it wouldn’t be a problem,” he replied. “The girls are currently on recess from school, so perhaps they could come for a visit for a few weeks.”

Anakin smiled. “That sounds like a fine idea,” he said as they arrived at the bridge. “Why don’t you contact them and make the arrangements?”

Piett smiled. “I will do that, sir,” he replied. “Thank you sir, thank you very much!”

Anakin merely nodded, pleased that Piett was so excited at the prospect of seeing his family again. *If anyone deserved to have the rules bent, it was certainly him*, Anakin reasoned.

"Lord Vader, we have a message coming in from the Rebel Command ship," the communication officer announced.

Anakin walked over to the station and watched as the image of Mon Mothma materialized on the screen.

"Good morning Commander," Anakin said.

"Good morning," Mon Mothma replied. "Was your mission to Tatooine a success?"

"Yes, Solo and Chewbacca are on board now," Anakin replied.

"I'm glad to hear it," Mothma replied. 'We'd like to have another meeting, Anakin,' she continued. "As soon as you can get over here."

"We'll be there within the hour," Anakin replied. "Is that soon enough?"

Mon Mothma nodded. "Yes, that will do just fine. See you then."

Anakin looked up at Piett as the transmission ended. "Looks like we're about to have our answer," he said.

Piett nodded. "So it seems," he replied. "She seemed rather...friendly. Perhaps that is a good sign."

"Let's hope so," Anakin replied. "I'd like you to accompany us, Piett. Perhaps when they see the admiral of the flagship they'll take us seriously."

Piett smiled. "If you insist, sir."

Within the hour, a small party had assembled in one of the great ship's many hangar bays. Anakin and his family were present of course; as well as Admiral Piett, Lieutenant Keller, Han Solo and Chewbacca.

Strength in numbers, isn't that what they say? Anakin mused as they all boarded the shuttle. He noticed how Leia was hanging close to Solo, and it only made his mood worse. She had not spoken a word to her father since their row earlier. *If she thinks I'm going to apologize for what I said, she's got another thing coming,* Anakin reflected grumpily as he boarded the ship, Padmé at his side. She had noticed the almost palpable tension between her husband and their daughter, and was waiting for an opportunity to speak to one of them about it. *They are so much alike, both stubborn to a fault.*

"Something going on I should know about?" Padmé asked her husband as they took their seats in the shuttle's passenger lounge.

Anakin turned and looked at her. "Other than the Rebels contacting us?" he asked.

"Yes, I'm aware of that," she replied, annoyed at his attempt to put her off. "You and Leia had words, didn't you?"

Anakin did not reply immediately. "She is acting in an inappropriate manner," he said simply. "I simply pointed that out to her."

Oh boy, Padmé thought. "Would you care to elaborate?" she asked him.

"She spent the night in the infirmary," he told her. "With Solo. In her nightgown. I caught her sneaking back into the suite first thing this morning."

Padmé sighed, finding herself yet again caught in the middle between her husband and her daughter. "I take it she didn't appreciate your observations."

Anakin snorted. "Hardly," he replied. "She pretty much told me I was over reacting."

"Imagine that," Padmé muttered. Anakin turned and looked at her.

"You think I'm over reacting, too, don't you?" he asked.

"I didn't say that, Ani," she replied. "I'm just concerned that you may have... come on a little strong."

Anakin sighed loudly. "What would you suggest then?" he asked. "That I just sit back and let her do what she wants?"

"No," Padmé replied. "And stop putting words in my mouth. You just tend to be rather... single minded sometimes, Anakin. When it comes to children, particularly teenagers, you need to be a little more flexible."

"I rescued Solo," he reminded her. "I think that shows flexibility. I could have easily let him rot there, but I didn't."

"You didn't because Leia would have gone herself and you know it," Padmé retorted.

Anakin did not reply. She was right, of course; that was exactly why he had gone to Tatooine to rescue Han and Chewbacca. *It certainly wasn't because I give a damn what happens to...* he stopped as he saw his wife watching him closely, almost as though she could read his mind.

"I'm right," she stated, sitting back in her seat.

Anakin rolled his eyes. *Aren't you always?*

The shuttle arrived at the command ship a short time later. Obi-Wan and Yoda were there to meet them, as well as the usual 'honor guard' as Mon Mothma had called the soldiers who escorted them to the conference room.

Upon seeing his old friend again, Chewbacca nearly burst with excitement, and went lumbering up to the diminutive Jedi, picking him up and hugging him tightly.

"Good to see you too, old friend," Yoda said, smiling at the demonstrative wookiee. "It *has* been a long time, hasn't it?"

"So you made it back okay," Anakin said to Obi-Wan. "We've been a little worried."

Obi-Wan raised his eyebrows. "Oh? And why is that?"

"Because you're an old man," Anakin replied with a grin.

Obi-Wan merely shook his head in response. "Always so subtle," he said with a smile. "I am fine, thank you for your concern."

"Shall we?" Padmé suggested. "I'm rather anxious to find out what they have decided."

“Yes, we all are,” Leia said, looking at her father. “Let’s go.”

As soon as they entered the room, Anakin could sense the tension amidst the four rebel leaders seated around the conference table. *They are conflicted*, he realized with a sinking feeling. *They cannot agree...*

“Please sit down,” Admiral Ackbar invited them.

“Good to see you, Solo,” General Reikan said. “And you as well, Chewbacca. We were concerned when Princess Leia told us about what happened.”

“Well I’m fine, thanks to Anakin here,” Han replied, looking at his rescuer. “We’d both be slaves in that place for the rest of our lives if he hadn’t come when he did.”

Anakin turned and looked at his daughter as Han spoke; but she was too enthralled with Solo to notice. *Or perhaps too stubborn to look in my direction*, Anakin thought irritably.

“What decision have you come to?” Padmé asked without preamble.

Mon Mothma tensed visibly, but only for a moment. “Well, we haven’t, actually,” she said, turning to her comrades. “It seems the four of us are at an impasse and have been unable to come to a consensus.”

Anakin frowned. “So what does that mean exactly?” he asked, looking at each of them in turn. “Are you with us or against it?”

Ackbar sighed loudly, shaking his head. “The commander and I are all for this merger of our forces,” he told Anakin. “However, the good generals still have some serious doubts and have been unable to put them aside.”

“I see,” Anakin replied in frustration. “I ask again, what does that mean?”

“It means we needed to call in a fifth person,” Reikan said. “Someone who has been involved with the Alliance as long as we have. They will have to make the final decision.”

“And who will that person be?” Leia asked.

“Someone you know very well, Princess,” Dodonna replied. “Your father, the viceroy.”

“Bail Organa is your fifth person?” Anakin asked incredulously.

“Yes, is that a problem?” Reikan challenged. “He’s been involved since the earliest days, your wife can attest to that,” he said, looking at Padmé.

“Yes, that is true,” she said, turning to Anakin, realizing how unhappy he was with this news. No doubt Bail Organa resented Anakin now that he had claimed Leia as his child; would that resentment make it impossible for Organa to be impartial in his decision? Surely he would realize that by rejecting Anakin he would be cutting himself off completely from any relationship with Leia; despite their recent disagreement, it was obvious that Leia adored her real father.

“And when is the Viceroy expected to arrive?” Obi-Wan asked, breaking the tension that had developed around the large table.

“We are expecting him later on today,” Reikan responded. “He has already received a report on our situation, and so he has had an opportunity to read it over during his travels. Hopefully he will arrive ready to join our discussion.”

“Let us hope so,” Padmé said, looking at Anakin.

Anakin did not say anything, but merely stood up. “I suppose we have to wait then,” he said, his frustration evident to all.

“I’m afraid so,” Mon Mothma replied. “I’m sorry, I know this is very frustrating for you, but that’s where things stand right now.”

“We understand,” Luke said, standing up with his father. “And we appreciate your support, Commander.”

“Yes, we certainly do,” Padmé replied.

“We will contact you once the viceroy has arrived,” Ackbar spoke up. “No doubt you will want to present your case to him yourselves.”

“I would appreciate the opportunity to do so, yes,” Anakin replied.

“Then we shall reconvene later on today,” Mon Mothma said as they all stood. “Until then.”

Chapter 72

Chapter 72

Bail Organa sat reading the report Mon Mothma had sent him as his ship hurtled through space towards the Rebel Alliance's fleet. *So Anakin Skywalker wants to join the Alliance, he thought with disbelief. He's sure changed his tune, hasn't he?*

If Bail were completely honest with himself, he would have to admit that he harbored serious resentment towards Skywalker. Aside from the atrocities he had committed as Darth Vader, which were certainly abundant and horrific, Skywalker had virtually high jacked Organa's relationship with his daughter, Leia. Since learning the truth about her biological parents, Leia had been distant and cool with Organa, for which he blamed Skywalker directly. *She is my daughter, not his, he thought bitterly. Where was he when she woke in the night with fever when she was cutting her first tooth? When she learned to walk? When she fell and scraped her knee? I was there, not him! He was off slaughtering Jedi and other innocents, carving a path of murder and bloodshed across the galaxy.*

Cognitively Organa knew that having Anakin Skywalker on the side of the Rebellion would tip the scales in their favor. He also knew that he had Anakin to thank for saving Alderaan from certain destruction by the Death Star. But Bail Organa was hurting from the disintegration of his relationship with Leia, and his mind wasn't exactly thinking rationally. Since the death of his wife years earlier, Leia had been all he'd had in the way of family. Now that her real parents were in her life, she'd virtually divorced herself from the Organa name, even going so far as to assume her birth name.

"We've made the reversion to sublight, Your Excellency," one of Organa's guards informed him.

Bail looked up to acknowledge the man, and then turned back to the report. *So it's up to me, is it?* He mused. *Well, Vader, this will be one time when you won't get the last word,* he thought smugly as he stood up and prepared to meet the rebel leaders.

Star Destroyer Executor

Padmé watched as her husband paced up and down in the small sitting room. She knew him well enough to know that Anakin was lost in his own thoughts at this point, and that there was nothing she could say to alleviate the stress that he was feeling. All she could do was stand by him and support him in whatever way she could.

"I can't believe they'd ask Organa of all people," Anakin muttered. "How can they possibly expect him to be impartial?"

"Bail is a decent man, Anakin," Padmé reminded him gently. "Just look at the fine job he did with Leia."

Anakin nodded; he certainly couldn't deny that. "I know," he replied. 'But there's been a tremendous amount of animosity between he and I over the past two decades,' he told her. "I

highly doubt he is just going to forget all that.”

“You are forgetting something, Anakin,” Padmé pointed out to him.

“What is that?”

“You were Darth Vader for the past two decades,” she told him. “You’re not Darth Vader anymore. You have changed, and Bail won’t be able to deny that change. Not to mention that you saved Alderaan from certain destruction.”

“But will that be enough to convince him that he can trust me?” Anakin responded. “After everything I’ve done?”

Padmé stood up and walked over to him. She took his face in her hands. “I don’t know,” she replied softly. “But if he is the same man I knew all those years ago, then he will not simply judge you without considering all sides. He is a fair man, Ani; an honorable man. Besides, he knows what you mean to Leia. Do you really think he’s going to turn his back on her by rejecting you?”

“I don’t know what to think or what to expect,” he replied tiredly. “All I know is the longer we delay, the greater the chance that Palpatine will discover what we are up to. He isn’t a person who can be fooled for long, Padmé. I can’t ignore him for much longer without him growing suspicious.”

The mention of Palpatine’s name sent a shiver up Padmé’s spine. It had been many years since she had seen the evil Sith Lord. It was incredible to her to think that at one time he had been her friend. *No, he was never my friend, she thought bitterly; he simply used me to get what he wanted, just as he used Anakin. He used and destroyed us both — but never again.*

“Palpatine needs you,” Padmé reminded him. “He is desperate — that gives you the advantage, Ani. Don’t forget that.”

Anakin nodded. “I know,” he said. ‘But even in his desperation he will grow impatient if I do not make a move soon. That is what makes this whole situation with the Alliance so bloody frustrating,’ he added, recommencing his pacing. “They are so damn conservative it makes me nuts.”

Padmé smiled. “Patience has never been easy for you, I know,” she said.

Anakin had to smile. “No, you’re right,” he said. “You’d think I’d have acquired at least a little over the years.”

Padmé tilted her head to one side and looked up at him. “I think you have,” she said. “You are not the same man you were when we were married.”

He smiled. “I wasn’t much more than a boy when we were married,” he reminded her.

Padmé lifted her eyebrows. “Oh, I beg to differ,” she said with a smile.

Anakin laughed. “Well, I suppose in some ways at least,” he replied.

“Yes, in some ways,” she concurred. “You were very impatient, impulsive, and headstrong; you still are those things, but to a much lesser extent.”

“You mean I grew up?” he asked with a smile.

Padmé laughed. “Yes, I suppose so. The point I’m trying to make is that you are not the same man you were all those years ago, Anakin. You have matured; you have grown and become much wiser, much stronger. Bail Organa will not be able to ignore all that when he meets you.”

Anakin sighed. “I hope you’re right, Angel,” he said. “The fate of the galaxy depends upon it.”

At that moment, the door opened and Leia walked in. When Anakin’s eyes met hers, they both looked away, neither of them willing to take the first step towards reconciliation. Padmé, however, had other ideas.

“Leia, I’m glad you’re here,” she said as Leia started to head straight to her room. She stopped and turned to her mother, glancing at her father briefly.

“Oh?” she said. “Why is that?”

“I think you and your father need to have a chat,” Padmé replied, looking back at Anakin, who was staring at her wide eyed. ‘Don’t give me that look, Anakin,’ she said. “I’m tired of the squabbling and the tension between the two of you.” She looked back at Leia. “Sit down,” she said in a tone that left for room for debate. Leia sat down at once, somewhat surprised by her mother’s take charge attitude. “You too,” Padmé added, turning to Anakin next. Anakin sat down across from Leia, avoiding eye contact with her.

“Now then,” Padmé said, as she sat down as well, “the way I see it, you both have reason to be upset with the other. Leia, you think your father is too interfering, too judgmental of Han, and is treating you like a child, correct?”

Leia nodded, looking at Anakin who had to bite back the words that jumped to his mouth.

“But you need to look at things from a different perspective,” Padmé continued, looking at her daughter. “As for Han, he has promised to try, and he is trying. You have to admit, Leia that being seen in your nightgown by members of the crew was rather inappropriate for a young woman in your position.”

Leia sighed loudly, hating to admit that her mother was right. “I suppose,” she said at last, looking at her father.

But Padmé wasn’t finished yet. “Your father has spent your entire life time apart from you and Luke, and has only recently found you,” she went on to say. “He is naturally going to be very protective of you, and that only means that he loves you a great deal,” she explained.

Anakin nodded his agreement, noticing that the hardness in Leia’s expression had begun to soften. He was about to say something when Padmé continued, turning to him next.

“And you, Anakin,” she said. ‘You think that Leia is stubborn and strong willed,’ she began. “That she is unwilling to listen to you because she thinks she knows better, and is being completely unreasonable when it comes to her relationship with Han Solo.”

“That sums it up well,” Anakin said, looking back at Leia.

“It does, but you also need to see things from a different viewpoint,” Padmé told him. ‘Namely your daughter’s. Leia is not a child, she is almost twenty years old,’ Padmé began. “And needs to be treated as such. You need to trust that she is capable of making good life

choices, and not question everything she does. Yes, she may have shown poor judgment parading about in her nightgown, but you clearly over reacted. Leia loves you, Anakin, she idolizes you. But if you can't learn to be more flexible, you will jeopardize the wonderful relationship that has grown between the two of you, and I know neither of you wants to see that. I certainly don't," she put in. "And it breaks my heart to see the two of you at odds this way."

Anakin cast his eyes down at the floor; Padmé's words making him feel ashamed of his behavior.

"Perhaps you two would like some time alone to talk," Padmé said, standing up.

"I think so," Leia said, feeling as contrite as her father. She looked at him. "Thanks Mom," she added softly.

Anakin looked up at her and nodded. "Yes, thank you Angel," he said. "For giving us the kick in the pants we both needed."

Padmé smiled. "Any time," she said, and turned to leave the room. She was met in the doorway by Luke.

"Mom, good you're all here" he said. "We just got word from the command ship that Viceroy Organa has arrived."

Padmé nodded, looking back. "Good," she said. "Let's give them some time alone, Luke. They have some things to discuss."

"They're talking again?" he asked as he and his mother walked down the corridor.

Padmé nodded. "They are now," she said with a smile. "Luke, I need to get over to the command ship. Think you can handle one of those shuttles?"

Luke nodded. "Yeah, sure Mom." He looked at his mother, knowing her well enough to recognize the expression in her eyes. "What do you have in mind?"

"I intend to have a chat with the Viceroy," she said, trying not to let her deep rooted resentments rise to the surface. "He and I have a lot to discuss."

"I'm sure," Luke concurred. "When do you want to go?"

"Right now," Padmé said. "Before your sister and father know what I'm doing."

Luke smiled. "Mom, you never cease to amaze me."

Padmé smiled and linked her arm through her son's. "Come on," she said. "Let's go."

A short time later Luke and Padmé were on their way to the command ship. Padmé was quiet on the trip over as she planned what she was going to say to Bail Organa. There was so much she wanted to say, so much she felt needed to be said. She was counting on Bail being the same reasonable, honor bound man he had been when she had known him twenty years earlier.

Once on board, Padmé and Luke were shown to the room where Bail Organa was finishing the report Mon Mothma had furnished him with.

“Luke, I need to speak to him alone,” Padmé told her son before they entered the room. “I hope you understand.”

“Of course I do,” Luke replied, sensing that his mother had serious issues she needed to discuss with Leia’s adoptive father. “I’ll catch up with you later. Good luck,” he added, giving his mother a hug.

“Thanks Luke,” she replied. “I hope I won’t need it.”

Luke left his mother as Padmé turned to the door. She took a deep breath as she activated the door chime.

The door slid opened and Bail Organa stood before her. He had aged quite a bit since she had seen him last; the stress of twenty years fighting the Empire had been hard on him. But in his eyes she could still see the same man she had known so many years ago.

“Padmé!” he exclaimed upon seeing her. “I can’t believe my eyes!”

Padmé simply smiled. “Surprised to see me, Bail?” she asked.

“Well Leia told me that you were alive,” he said, showing her into the room. “But still... it’s good to see you, Padmé. It’s been a long time.”

“Yes, a life time in fact,” she replied. “My children’s life time.”

Bail could see the look in her eyes. *She’s angry*, he realized, not terribly surprised. *I suppose I should have expected this.*

“Sit down, Padmé,” he said at last. “Obviously you have a great deal on your mind.”

“Yes I do,” Padmé replied, sitting down. ‘I understand that you have been given a singularly important job to do,’ she said to his surprise. “And that you have a very important decision to make.”

Bail nodded, trying to determine where she was headed with her line of questioning. “I do,” he replied. “And I’m honored to have been chosen to do it.”

“As you should be,” Padmé replied. “It’s not everyone who holds the future of the galaxy in the palm of their hand. I only hope that you make the right decision.”

Bail narrowed his eyes, beginning to feel as though he was under attack. “You obviously have something to say, Padmé,” he said. “I’ve never known you to mince words; why not just come out and say it.”

“Very well, I will,” she said. “I realize that you and Darth Vader have had...issues, but..”

“Issues?” Bail repeated incredulously. “Is that what you’d call it? Padmé, you have no idea what your dear husband has been up to for the past twenty years.”

“Don’t I?” she challenged. “I may have lost my memory, but I have regained it, thanks to Anakin. You see Bail, once he learned that I was alive, he moved galaxies to find me and to bring me back; despite the fact that I would remember everything he had done, he risked my rejection of him in order to restore my life to me.”

“Padmé, we all thought you were dead,” Bail replied defensively. “Not just him. When you gave birth to the twins, you...”

“I did not die, Bail,” she interjected. “I was very ill, but I survived! Perhaps if you had made the effort to inquire after me, you may have found that out. But you didn’t bother, did you? I suppose it was just easier to take my child and believe that I was dead, wasn’t it? Knowing that I was alive would have complicated things, particularly where Vader was concerned.”

“What exactly are you implying?” he demanded.

“I think you know,” she retorted. “Darth Vader existed in Darkness for two decades believing that I was dead, that his child was dead. If he had known that we were alive, don’t you think that it would have made a difference in him?”

“No, I don’t,” Bail replied at once. “You seem to forget, Padmé, that it was Vader who tried to kill you and your unborn children.”

“Of course I haven’t forgotten!” she cried angrily. “What he did on Mustafar was terrible, unspeakable....but he has lived with the guilt and pain of that for the rest of his life. Darth Vader existed in darkness because of that pain, that emptiness; it wasn’t until he found his child, his daughter that he finally began to conquer that Darkness. The very fact that he risked everything to save her proves my point. Had he known his family was alive, he would not have spent twenty years in darkness, and the galaxy would have been spared two decades of his crimes.”

“I cannot deny what you are saying,” Bail replied, “but does that mean he can be forgiven for those crimes?”

“He does not expect to be forgiven for those crimes,” she retorted. “All he wants is a chance to atone for them. He has already begun to do so, and if you weren’t so narrow minded you would see that.”

“Narrow minded?” he repeated. “Because I cannot forget the way Vader persecuted the people of the galaxy? Because I cannot forgive the way he exploited the citizens of Alderaan and every other planet in the...”

“The citizens of Alderaan would be dead right now, you included, if it weren’t for him,” Padmé retorted hotly. “And you know it! Alderaan would have been blown into space dust if Vader hadn’t sabotaged the Death Star, or have you conveniently forgotten that rather pertinent fact?”

Organa was silent, the masterful construction of Padmé’s argument leaving him speechless. Nothing she had said could be denied; nothing she had said had been anything but the truth.

“No, I have not forgotten,” he said at last. “I cannot deny that he has changed, Padmé, nor will I.”

“If you know that he is redeemed, if you can see the change in him, why can’t you put the past aside and accept him?” she pressed. ‘You have always been fair minded, Bail. So what is the real reason that you mistrust him still?’ She stopped as a thought struck her. “It’s Leia, isn’t it?” she asked. “You resent him because of the relationship he and Leia have now.”

Organa looked away at this point, not able to face her. “I raised Leia,” he said quietly. “As though she was my very own flesh and blood, Padmé. I love her as though she were my very old child. Since she has found him, she has slowly been pushing me away. Can you blame me for being resentful?”

“You dare to say that to me?” she asked, her voice full of anger. “My children were taken from me moments after they were born, and I was left to stagnate in a mental institution for twenty years until Anakin finally found me. Neither you nor anyone else bothered to determine if I was dead or alive all those years! If anyone has a right to be resentful, it is me! I was robbed of the privilege of raising my own children because the almighty Jedi decided to split them up and take them away from me!! Don’t you *dare* tell me that *you* are resentful!!”

Bail was shocked by the vehemence of Padmé’s response, and for the first time he considered her point of view. She had endured so much pain, suffered so much loss because of Anakin Skywalker’s fall from grace; and yet it was clear that she had not only forgiven him, but that she still loved him deeply. That level of compassion staggered Organa; it humbled him, and forced him to examine his own conscience.

“I’m sorry,” he said at last, at a loss for better words. “I don’t know what else to say, Padmé...I can’t even imagine what you have been through all these years, how much you have lost, how much you have suffered.”

“Not just me, Bail,” she told him. “Anakin has suffered just as much, perhaps more. He spent twenty years believing he had killed his family, living in that suit in constant pain. Do you even know why he turned to the Dark Side? Did Yoda even bother to tell you?”

“No,” Organa admitted.

“He did it to save me,” she told him. “Palpatine manipulated him, used him and lied to him. He turned to the Dark Side because he believed it was the only way he could save me from what he thought was certain death in childbirth.”

“I...I didn’t know that,” Organa replied quietly. “I had no idea...”

“No, of course you didn’t,” Padmé replied. “The Jedi didn’t think that was important enough to tell you. Perhaps now that you have the whole picture you will be able to make a decision that isn’t based on half truths and prejudices. You’re a good person, Bail. I hope you do the right thing.”

Padmé stood up and left, leaving Organa standing there looking after her, shaken and astonished by what had just transpired.

In the corridor outside, Padmé stood for a moment, trembling with emotion. She had tried very hard to maintain a professional, unemotional manner; but it had been impossible. Where her family was concerned, Padmé was anything but unemotional. Organa had managed to reopen wounds that had only now begun to heal. Yet, perhaps that was what was required for him to see what was at stake. Emotions were part of being a sentient being, and sentient beings were very much a part of the equation. To ignore that would be irresponsible and short sighted.

“Mom? You okay?”

Padmé looked up to see Luke standing before her. He had sensed her anger, and it had him concerned.

Padmé nodded. “Yes, I’m okay,” she said. “I did what I came to do. Now let’s go home.”

Chapter 73

Chapter 73

Luke could not help but notice how quiet his mother was on the way back to the *Executor*. He sensed that her conversation with the viceroy had been a heated one, that it had reopened old wounds. He looked over at her as he piloted the shuttle.

“So how did it go with the viceroy?” he asked.

Padmé looked at her son. “I’m not sure,” she replied. “I had planned to speak to him senator to senator, to use logic and reason to get him to see our point of view. But I’m afraid it didn’t quite turn out that way.”

“Does that surprise you, Mom?” Luke asked.

Padmé sighed. “I suppose it shouldn’t,” she replied. “It’s not exactly easy to remain detached when talking about one’s family.”

Luke smiled. “No, I know what you mean,” he said. “Speaking of which, I wonder how things went between Leia and Dad. What did you say to them to get them to start talking again?”

“I simply pointed out to each of them how stubborn and unfair they were being,” she replied, a trace of a smile on her lips. “They are so much alike it’s frightening.”

Luke laughed. “Yeah, I know what you mean,” he said. “I guess we’ll find out soon enough,” he added. “I’m going to contact the *Executor* to request they lower their shields.”

Padmé nodded her understanding, and watched as her son piloted the shuttle effortlessly into the massive hangar bay. *He’s more like his father than he knows*, she reflected.

Anakin and his daughter had spent the better part of an hour talking, arguing, and hashing out all their differences. And at the end, they had reconciled. Anakin had promised, again, to give Han Solo a fair chance, and Leia had promised not to act in a manner that was inappropriate for a young woman of her station. She also vowed to trust her father’s judgment more, as Anakin had promised to trust hers. Both were satisfied at the end, and both were relieved, for the rift between them had upset them both equally.

Anakin and Leia were sitting in the refectory having lunch when Han Solo entered the large room. He looked around briefly, and, seeing Leia, smiled and began to make his way towards her. However when he noticed that she was with her father, he hesitated. *Don’t let him intimidate you, Solo*, he told himself, screwing up his courage. *Do it for her... do it for Leia*.

“Mind if I join you?” Han asked as he reached the table where Anakin and Leia were seated.

Leia looked up and smiled at him. “Of course not,” she replied. “Please sit down.”

Anakin watched the young man as he took a seat beside Leia. *Keep your mouth closed, Skywalker*, he told himself, forcing himself not to let Han's presence get to him. *You promised to be fair.*

"How are the ribs?" Anakin asked, surprising all three of them with his question.

"Good," Han replied at once. "Yeah, they're good, thanks. The medical droids were really great."

Anakin nodded. "How did that happen?" he asked.

"Bossk and his pals were a little less than gentle," Han replied wryly.

"From what I know about Bossk, you were lucky to remain alive long enough to get to Tatooine," Anakin stated. "Particularly your wookiee friend."

"You've had dealings with Bossk, Dad?" Leia asked, thrilled that the two men she loved the most were actually having a civil conversation.

"Yes," Anakin replied. "The Trandoshans are a ruthless, brutal race."

"I'd have to agree with you there," Han replied. "Sort of like the Hutts."

"Ah yes, the Hutts," Anakin replied. "Charming aren't they?" he asked bitterly.

Han nodded. "How do you know them?"

Anakin hesitated before replying. "I was a slave when I was a child," he said at last. "My mother and I were... owned by Gardulla the Hutt, the wife of Jabba."

"You were a slave?" Han asked in surprise.

Anakin nodded. "Yes I was," he replied.

"I guess you and Chewie have something in common then," Han replied. "He was a slave too."

"Many wookiees were," Leia put in. "That's how you and he met, isn't it? Didn't you help him gain his freedom?"

"Yeah," Han replied. "I kind of have a problem with slavery," he added sourly.

Anakin nodded, feeling a measure of respect for the young man. "How did you free him?" he asked.

Han shuffled in his seat, feeling somewhat uneasy under Anakin's scrutiny. "I was with the Imperial navy for a short time, believe it or not," he began. "About five years as a matter of fact, first at the academy on Carida, and then on active service."

"I did not know that," Anakin replied, surprised that the young man had ever demonstrated enough discipline for active service.

"Well, it was a short lived career," Han replied. "I refused to follow a direct order, and was dishonorably discharged."

Anakin frowned. "What order was that?" he asked.

"I was part of a scheduled rendezvous with a slaving vessel," Han explained. 'I lead a squadron and boarded the ship which had been damaged. Chewie was on board. He'd released the Wookiee children that were to be sold,' he continued, "and was barely conscious when I found him. My commander ordered me to skin Chewie, but I refused. I knew it was insubordination, but I didn't care. I guess that makes me a bad soldier, but some things are more important than following orders."

"So that is why he owes you a life debt," Anakin replied.

"Yeah, crazy eh?" Han said with a self deprecating smile. "I haven't been able to get rid of him ever since."

Anakin couldn't help but laugh at this comment.

"Seems you are a man of honor, Solo," Anakin said at last. "I respect that in a man."

Han could barely believe his ears. "Thanks," he said. "That means a lot coming from you, sir."

Anakin nodded, beginning to see that there was indeed more to this man than he realized. *Just as Leia said there was*, he reflected.

"I need to get to the bridge," Anakin said, standing up. "Enjoy your meal," he added, and then walked away.

Leia watched him leave and then turned back to Han. "Wow," she said. "That was rather unexpected."

Han nodded. "Yeah," he replied. "I had no idea your dad had been a slave. Sort of gives me a whole different perspective on him."

"And him on you," Leia pointed out, "knowing that you were responsible for freeing Chewie. I could tell that impressed him tremendously."

"We'll see, sweetheart," Han replied. "I'm not getting my hopes up just yet."

Anakin made his way to the bridge. He felt a great sense of relief at having made peace with his daughter. *Thanks to you, my angel*, he reflected. *I'll have to be sure to show you my gratitude later.*

Arriving at the bridge, Anakin was expecting to find Padmé there; but she was not there. He realized suddenly that he had not seen her since she had insisted that he and Leia iron out their differences earlier. *I wonder where she is... she must be with Luke*, he reasoned, since he hadn't seen his son in the last several hours either.

Walking over to one of the computer consoles, he asked the ship's scanners to locate Luke and Padmé, and was alarmed when he was informed that they were not on board the vessel.

"Something wrong, sir?" Lieutenant Keller asked, stepping up to Anakin.

Anakin looked at the young officer with a frown. "When did my wife and son leave the ship?" he asked.

Keller was surprised by the questions. "I'm afraid I don't know, sir," he replied. 'I've only been on duty a few minutes,' he explained. "But I can try to find out, sir."

“Please do so,” Anakin replied. He had an uneasy feeling not knowing where Padmé was. He focused his mind on her, and soon sensed her presence. She was close by and getting closer. Luke was definitely with her, and they were....

“Sir, Shuttle Meridian requesting permission to board.”

Anakin nodded, relief filling him. “Bring them aboard.” He then turned and left the bridge, heading for the hangar bay.

The shuttle door was just opening when Anakin arrived at the hangar bay. As soon as he saw Padmé, he knew that something was wrong. Despite the smile she gave him when their eyes met, he could sense that she was upset.

“Where were you?” He asked. “Why didn’t you tell me you were leaving?”

“We went to the command ship,” Luke told his father.

“I figured as much,” Anakin replied.

“I needed to see Bail alone,” Padmé told her husband. “There were some things I needed to say to him privately.”

Anakin frowned. “What things?”

“Can we go somewhere and talk about this?” Padmé asked. “This is hardly the place for a private conversation.”

“Of course,” Anakin responded. “Let’s go.”

“So things are okay with you and Leia?” Luke asked his father as the three of them walked through the ship.

Anakin nodded. “Yes, they are fine now,” he replied. “Your mother put us in our place,” he added, looking at Padmé with a smile.

Luke smiled too. “She’s pretty good at that I’ve noticed,” he remarked.

Anakin was intrigued by his son’s comment.

“Yes she is,” he replied at last.

“Where is Leia now?” Luke asked.

“I left her with Solo in the refectory,” Anakin replied. “They’re probably still there, it wasn’t that long ago.”

“Refectory?” Luke asked. “Great, I could use something to eat myself. I’ll catch up with you both later.”

“Thank you again, Luke,” Padmé said, kissing her son on the cheek.

“Any time, Mom,” Luke replied, and then left his parents.

“So what happened on the command ship that has you so upset?” Anakin asked his wife as they entered their quarters. “Your conversation with Organa didn’t go well, did it?”

Padmé sighed as she sat down. “I don’t know,” she admitted. “It’s very hard to say where his mind is.”

Anakin nodded. “So what happened? What did he say?”

“Well, he began by reminding me of all the atrocities Darth Vader committed.”

“Not surprising,” Anakin replied.

“No, but I pointed out how Vader had prevented the destruction of Alderaan,” she replied. “And how Leia was saved by Vader at tremendous personal risk.”

“Did that make any difference?” Anakin asked, not terribly hopeful that it had.

“It didn’t at first,” Padmé admitted. “He’s very jealous because Leia and you are so close now. He had the audacity to tell me he felt resentful. Can you believe it?”

Anakin shook his head. “*He* is resentful?” he asked bitterly. “*He* is? After taking our daughter and never bothering to determine if you were alive all these years?”

Padmé could see how angry he was, and she was beginning to wonder if she’d made a mistake telling him what had transpired between her and Organa. Still, knowing Anakin, he would have sensed Bail’s resentment eventually. It wasn’t easy to hide anything from Anakin Skywalker.

“I pointed that out to him,” she replied. ‘Actually my response to him was rather heated,’ she told him. “I tried to remain calm, but it was impossible. He just made me so angry, brought out so many emotions.”

“I’m sure,” Anakin replied. “I’m angry just hearing about it. So how did you leave things with him? Can we count on his support or not?”

“I wish I could tell you, Ani,” Padmé replied. “But I got the feeling that he was rather shaken by my anger. Bail is a decent person. He won’t make a decision of this magnitude based on spite or malice.”

Anakin sighed deeply. “I hope not,” he said.

“All we can do now is wait, Anakin,” she said. “There’s nothing else we can do at this point.”

Anakin nodded. “Thank you, Angel,” he said.

“What for?”

“For standing up for me the way you did,” he replied. “It means a great deal to me that you did that.”

Padmé smiled, and took his hand. “I believe in you, Anakin,” she told him. “Of course I would stand up for you. I don’t know if it made any difference, but I had to try.”

“I know,” he said, picking up her hand and kissing it. “And I love you for it. For the second time today I am grateful to you. I must think of something I can do to show you how grateful,” he said with a smile.

Padmé raised her eyebrows. “Oh?” she said. “I have an idea or two.”

“Is that so?” he asked with a smile. “Care to share them with me?”

Padmé smiled, and leaned over to him, whispering into his ear.

Anakin’s smile widened as she did so. “You never cease so amaze me, you know that?” he asked, pulling her onto his lap.

“Good,” she said, “That means you’ll never get bored.”

“Bored? With you in my life?” he asked, running a hand up and down her back. “Simply not possible, my love,” he said, moving closer to kiss her. Their tender moment was interrupted, however, by the comm.

“Sir, the rebel command ship is signaling,” a voice announced. “They wish to resume the treaty talks.”

Anakin pulled back and looked at his wife. “Acknowledged,” he said. “Looks like this will have to wait,” he said to her with a smile.

“I will hold you to that,” she replied.

Anakin grinned. “Oh, no worries there,” he said as she stood up. “Come on; let’s hope third time is the charm.”

Chapter 74

Chapter 74

Anakin and Padmé met their children in the hangar bay, having themselves been alerted of the Alliance's message. They were soon joined by Yoda and Obi-Wan.

"Where is Han?" Padmé asked.

Leia glanced at her father before replying. "Well, he wasn't sure if he ought to join us," she said.

"He's part of the Alliance, isn't he?" Anakin asked.

Leia nodded.

"Then he has a say in this," Anakin replied. "He should be there."

Leia and her mother exchanged a look of surprise, and Leia walked away to content Han on her comlink.

"I'm pleased to see you're starting to warm up to Han," Padmé told Anakin.

"Well I wouldn't go that far," he told her. "But I did promise to be civil."

"You know Anakin," Obi-Wan put in, "I think once you get to know the young man, you will find the two of you have many things in common."

"Yes, so I've been told," Anakin said, watching Han enter the room moments later. 'Come on, let's go,' he said, turning back to his wife and son. "Time to get this over with."

The short trip over to the command ship seemed longer than usual to everyone on board. No one, even the Jedi among them, could predict what the decision would be.

Leia had learned of her mother's conversation with Bail Organa, and was secretly pleased that she had done so. Leia had already voiced her own feelings about what had happened; but her mother had lost so much as well. She had lost her children, her husband, twenty years of her life; it still astonished Leia that her mother could be so forgiving and positive considering all that she had been through in her life. A lesser person would have spent the rest of their life wallowing in resentment and self pity; but Padmé Amidala Skywalker was a person of singular strength and integrity, a person that Leia was tremendously proud to call her mother.

"Relax, Anakin," Padmé told him as they neared the rebel ship. "It's going to be fine, I just know it."

"I wish I could share your confidence," he told her. "But Bail Organa and I have a long and less than cordial history between us."

"Yes, I know that," Padmé replied. "But a lot has happened since then, Anakin; that will make the difference."

“Perhaps,” Anakin replied, feeling the tension within him growing with each passing kilometer.

The delegation was escorted to the conference room upon their arrival at the command ship. They walked along in virtual silence, the tension becoming almost unbearable as they drew closer to the conference room. Anakin held his wife’s hand tightly as the escort came to a stop and stood aside, allowing them to enter. He looked at her briefly as the doors opened and Luke and Leia proceeded into the room.

As soon as the door opened, the rebel leaders looked up, Bail Organa included. His eyes met those of his Leia first, and he smiled at her. He stood up and went to her, hugging her tightly. “I’m so happy to see you,” he told her softly. Leia returned his hug, realizing for the first time just how much she had missed her adoptive father.

“It’s good to see you too,” Leia told him as she pulled back. ‘I want you to meet someone,’ she said, turning to Luke. “This is my twin brother, Luke.”

Luke held out a hand and shook Bail’s hand. “Nice to meet you, sir,” he said.

“Yes, same here,” Organa replied. He then looked to see another young man move up to Leia’s side. “You must be Han Solo,” he said, recognizing him from the holo communications.

“That’s right,” Han said, holding out his hand as well. “Pleased to meet you, sir,” he added as they shook hands.

Organa nodded, sizing up the young man who was obviously so taken with Leia, as she was with him.

“Senator Organa,” Yoda said as he entered the room next. “Good to see you it is. A long time it has been.”

Bail smiled as he greeted Yoda and Obi-Wan, pleased beyond words that his dear old friends had survived.

The last ones to enter the room were Anakin and Padmé. Organa looked at the doorway as his eyes met those of Anakin, the smile fading from his face.

Anakin did his best not to show open animosity towards Organa, but it was not easy for him. All he could see when he looked at the viceroy was him holding his newborn daughter in his arms, walking away from Padmé as she suffered the trauma of child birth.

As for Organa, the sight of a restored Anakin Skywalker was utterly shocking to him. He knew that it had happened, he knew that Darth Vader had been remade; but seeing it with his own eyes was something altogether different. *He looks like he did twenty years ago*, Organa thought in astonishment. *It hardly seems possible...*

“Welcome,” Mon Mothma said, sensing the tension between the two men and wishing to diffuse it before it grew worse. “Please, sit down.”

Anakin pulled a chair out for his wife and then took a seat beside her, as Leia took the seat on his other side, while Luke sat on Padmé’s right. Anakin felt empowered with his family surrounding him. The strength he felt in their love and support buoyed him, and made him feel as though with them he could face any adversity.

"I'd like to thank you for your patience," Mon Mothma began. "I am sure it has not been an easy few days."

"We realize that making a decision of this magnitude takes time," Padmé replied, ever the diplomat. "And we appreciate that you have taken our offer seriously enough to give it that time."

"So what is it to be?" Anakin asked, leaning forward, cutting to the chase. He was in no mood for courtesies or small talk.

Mon Mothma looked at Anakin, and then at Bail. "Viceroy? Would you like to address this question?" she said.

All eyes turned to Organa, who felt the pressure of the enormous decision weighing on him.

"This has been a most... unexpected turn of events," he began. "Had someone told me one year ago that I would be sitting down with Darth Vader and discussing the possibility of an alliance, I never would have thought it possible."

"You are not sitting with Darth Vader," Leia spoke up. "Darth Vader no longer exists. He is gone forever," she added, turning to Anakin. He smiled at her, and reached out and gave her hand a squeeze.

A jolt of jealous ripped through Organa as he witnessed the obvious closeness between Leia and her biological father. *She used to look at me that way, he thought wistfully. I truly have lost her...*

"Yes, we all know that," Mon Mothma said. 'Obviously if it were Darth Vader we were dealing with we would not even be having this civil discussion.' She looked at Anakin. "Clearly Darth Vader has been destroyed," she said.

Anakin nodded, appreciating her support.

"Yes, there is no denying that," Organa said at last, looking at Anakin. 'I want to thank you for doing what you did to save Alderaan,' he said. "I understand you enraged Grand Moff Tarkin tremendously," he added with a wry smile.

Anakin nodded a hint of a smile on his own face. "He was properly annoyed," he replied, remembering the red faced Tarkin raging at his underlings. "It was rather amusing, actually."

Organa chuckled. "I'm sure it was," he said. 'But seriously, Anakin, I thank you on behalf of the people of Alderaan.' He paused before continuing, swallowing his pride in order to say what he felt he must. "I... I also want to thank you for saving Leia's life and protecting her the way you did. I am very grateful to you for that."

"Leia is my child," Anakin replied, looking intently at Organa. "My flesh and blood. Once I knew that, nothing else mattered."

Organa nodded, understanding completely. Leia may not be his flesh and blood, but he knew that he would have done anything to save her life just as Anakin had.

"There are other factors to consider in this matter, however," Organa said next. "The matter of a lifetime of crimes perpetrated by Darth Vader, the thousands of lives destroyed by him

and his shock troopers. While no one here can deny the...miraculous transformation that has happened to you,' he said, addressing Anakin, "the twenty years you spent terrorizing the galaxy cannot be denied either."

A sinking feeling started to blossom in Anakin's stomach. The past would never be forgotten, it seemed; he would never be able to escape from it.

"No one here denies that Darth Vader was a monster of epic proportions," Anakin said, knowing that everyone was thinking it, 'I included. I cannot offer any excuse for what I did, I do not ask for forgiveness, for I do not deserve any. What I do ask for is the chance to undo some of the damage I was responsible for. Destroying the Empire, destroying the emperor is the best way to do that.' He stopped and looked at his wife. "My family has given me a second chance," he said, "the doctors on Polis Massa have given me a second chance; I am asking you to give me that chance as well."

Organa listened to Anakin's impassioned words, and they helped justify what he wanted to say next.

"Forty-eight hours ago I had made my decision," Organa stated, looking at the members of the Skywalker family. 'I felt that I had enough information to decide wisely and fairly, and in the best interest of the people of the galaxy. But then something happened.' He turned his attention to Padmé. "I was given a rather rude awakening by a good friend," he said. "I was angry at first, because I was forced to listen to some things I didn't want to hear, face some truths I'd rather not have acknowledged. But I did hear them, and I did face them. And they made me think that perhaps my decision had been the wrong one, and I began to second guess myself." He paused for a moment as he gathered his thoughts. "Seeing you here with your family has been eye opening," he told Anakin. "Seeing how much they love you, how much they believe in you, has made me feel that I have indeed made the right decision."

"And what decision is that?" Leia asked, hoping that she was reading him correctly.

Bail looked at her next. "I have decided to give your father a second chance," he said, giving her a smile.

For a moment there was no reaction, and then everyone started talking at once. Anakin could hear everyone around him offering their congratulations, their support, their relief; but he only had eyes for one person.

Turning to his wife, Anakin pulled her into his embrace, at a loss for words. Padmé held him tightly, too emotional to speak for a moment; but when she was unable to hold back her tears when she heard him whisper two simple words into her ear. "Thank you."

Chapter 75

Chapter 75

Imperial City-Coruscant

Emperor Palpatine was not a man who worried often, but when he did, it was for good reason. It had been more than two weeks since the death of Darth Ferreus; and while he had not lived up to the potential that Palpatine had anticipated, Ferreus had served a purpose. He had been not been afraid to get his hands dirty when necessary, and had been just intimidating enough to keep those under his command in line.

But now Ferreus was gone, and Palpatine was without an apprentice. He had fully expected after his brief contact with Darth Vader that the powerful Sith would accept Palpatine's offer, and would return to his service. Palpatine knew Vader well, and felt sure that is was only a matter of time before he came to his senses and returned to where he belonged, at the emperor's side. And yet, there had been no contact from Vader in at least a week. Was it the influence of his wife that was holding him back? Amidala had always had a strong influence on Vader, *at least until Mustafar*, Palpatine reflected with smugness. *Things had gone far better than I had ever anticipated on that particular day... Vader turned into a half human cyborg, his wife near death because of his anger...* It was the perfect set of circumstances to keep Vader firmly engulfed in Darkness. At least, until he learned the truth.

Having found his children had caused a change in Vader, and had made him start to questions the *truths* that Palpatine had been feeding him for two decades. Vader was an intelligent man, after all; the fact that his children were alive had no doubt made him realize that Amidala had not in fact died at his hand. Yet, Palpatine knew Vader — he knew that the power of Darkness was not one he could resist for long, with or without Amidala.

"Excuse me, your highness."

Palpatine looked up at a red robed guard who had dared to interrupt his mediation.

"What is it?" he snapped.

"Lord Vader is making contact."

Palpatine tried to hide his surprise. "Patch it in here," he said calmly, rising from his throne. He made his way slowly to the communication screen, the sight of the face of Anakin Skywalker unnerving him.

"Lord Vader," he said coolly. "I was beginning to wonder when I would hear from you."

Vader did not acknowledge the emperor's terse comment. "I have come to a decision," he said, keeping his mental shields at maximum. "And have taken command of the *Executor*."

Palpatine nodded, a smile spreading over his ancient face. "Very good," he said.

"I wish to search for my children," Vader continued.

“Of course,” Palpatine replied, trying in vain to read Vader’s thoughts. “They will be a great asset to us.”

“Yes, they will,” Vader replied. “Once they are in my custody, we will join you, my master.”

Palpatine’s smile widened hearing Vader call him master after so long. *At last you know your place, Lord Vader*, he thought, sending the thoughts directly to the Dark Lord’s mind. *I am willing to forgive this time, but make no mistake; I will not brook any further betrayal. The next time it will mean your life.*

Palpatine thought he saw a flicker of indignation in Vader’s eyes, but it was gone instantly as Vader bowed his head in submission.

“I look forward to meeting your offspring, Lord Vader,” Palpatine said at last. “I trust I won’t have to wait long.”

“No,” Vader replied. “Not long at all. I have many leads; it won’t be long before I claim my children once again.”

Palpatine nodded. “I hope so, Lord Vader.”

Vader did not reply, and the transmission faded from the screen. Palpatine turned in his chair, unable to shake the feeling of uneasiness that he’d had ever since he had first seen the face of Anakin Skywalker again.

Endor System-Four days later

The planet Endor, a silvery gas giant, was orbited by nine moons. The largest of these moons, almost the size of a small planet, was known as the Forest Moon, the Sanctuary Moon, or simply as Endor.

The Endor system was not an easy one to reach. The uncharted area and a massive gravitational shadow of the planet made navigating this area treacherous and tricky. It also made this system the perfect place to hide the Empire’s greatest and most lethal secret: the second Death Star.

Kept secret from most of the Imperial forces, including the powerful moffs, the Death Star had been under construction for almost a month. Learning from the mistakes of the past, Palpatine over saw the design stage of his new super weapon personally, ensuring that the same problems that had plagued him in the construction stage of the first Death Star did not occur again with the new one. Thus, after only a month of construction, it was well under way, and had already begun to take shape above the Forest Moon.

Grand Moff Jerjerrod, an arrogant, self-serving little man, walked smugly amidst the construction, quite pleased with himself at having been appointed the commander of the mighty station. He was not an easy man to like, as any of the many underlings he commanded could attest to. Jerjerrod took his responsibilities seriously, and was not about to let the emperor down. The fact that he was utterly terrified of Palpatine was a huge motivating factor, and it made Jerjerrod push his men hard in their tasks. He wanted this space station to be the ultimate power in the universe, to out do the original Death Star in every conceivable way. *The Rebel Alliance won’t stand a chance once this is completed*, Jerjerrod thought smugly. *They don’t even know of its existence, much less its location. The emperor truly is a*

genius to keep this so secretive... It made Jerjerrod feel singularly important that he was the only Moff who even knew about the Death Star. In fact, he highly doubted if the emperor's apprentice the mighty Lord Vader had had any inkling of its existence before his mysterious end. That fact pleased Jerjerrod no end; and made his already considerable ego even more inflated.

"Sir, sir!"

Jerjerrod turned to see one of his junior officers approaching him.

"What is it?"

"Sir, long range sensors have detected a ship entering the Endor System," the young man reported.

Jerjerrod frowned. "Configuration?"

"It's one of ours sir," the officer replied. "It's the *Executor*."

What the devil are they doing here? Jerjerrod wondered as he followed his officer to the small command center of the space station. Sure enough, the enormous vessel had entered the system.

"Have they hailed us?" Jerjerrod asked the communications officer.

"No sir and they are ignoring our hails," the officer replied.

Jerjerrod's frown deepened. "The emperor did not inform me of any inspections," he muttered, starting to worry that it was the emperor who was on his way for a surprise visit. "Keep trying to hail them," he commanded.

"Sir, TIE fighters!"

Jerjerrod along with the rest of the officers and men in the small command center watched in stupefaction as a huge swarm of TIE fighters appeared, their huge number virtually filling the view screen as they approached at top speed.

"Sir, they are opening fire upon the *Vengeance!!*" came the startled cry of the tactical officer.

Jerjerrod could only watch in horror as the swarm of fighters attacked the destroyer.

"Sir, what should we do!?"

"I... I..." Jerjerrod stuttered as they watched helplessly as the unshielded ship was utterly decimated by the unrelenting waves of TIE fighters. *What do I do?* Jerjerrod wondered in utter panic. *Who do I contact? Who is close enough to help?*

"SIR!"

Jerjerrod's attempt to give an order was halted by the emergence of the mighty *Executor* which now loomed ominously before them.

"Hail them," Jerjerrod said, his voice barely audible.

"No response!"

Jerjerrod thought frantically. “Contact the fleet!” he cried. “Locate the closest vessel and...”

“Sir all channels have been jammed!”

“We’re sitting ducks,” Jerjerrod said as he watched the massive ship fill the screen, knowing with certainty that he would not live much longer. There were no shields, no weapons, no way to defend themselves, no way to escape.

Who is responsible for this? Who...

It was Jerjerrod’s last thought, for the enormous firepower of the *Executor* unleashed upon the unprotected shell of the Death Star, obliterating it within moments.

Watching from a safe distance, Anakin Skywalker sat in the cockpit of a TIE fighter. He thought briefly of the men who had perished in this attack, but realized that this was war. He had killed in battle before, and would again if necessary.

“Luke, do you read me?”

“I copy, Dad.”

“Solo?”

“Right here, sir.”

“Let’s go.”

Luke and Han acknowledged Anakin’s order and the three of them lead the squadron back to the *Executor*.

Chapter 76

Chapter 76

The massive squadron of TIE fighters returned to the *Executor*, having accomplished their task: they had begun the insurrection.

Padmé and Leia were waiting outside the enormous hangar for the men to return. Soon the door opened as a veritable sea of pilots streamed out into the corridor.

“Luke!” Padmé called as she saw her son emerge with Han Solo at his side. She ran to embrace him, just as Leia did to greet Han.

“I’m fine, Mom,” Luke said as his mother hugged him tightly.

“I know,” she said. “I’m just glad to see you.” She looked over his shoulder as she released him to see his father walking towards them. Despite the many battles he had been in over the years, the fear that Padmé felt when Anakin was involved in one had never seemed to lessen.

“Ani,” she sighed as she embraced him next.

Anakin was silent as he held his wife in his arms, and she sensed that he was disturbed by what had just happened. She pulled back and looked at him.

“You alright?” she asked.

Anakin nodded. “Yes,” he replied, not wishing to discuss how he was feeling at the moment. ‘Let’s get to the bridge,’ he said. “We need to let the Alliance know that the objective has been reached.”

Padmé nodded. “Piett has already done so,” she said.

“Good,” he said. He activated his comm. link. ‘Bridge, set course for Axxila,’ he said. “We have passengers waiting for us.”

At once, sir!

“Axxila?” Padmé asked.

Anakin nodded. “Piett’s family,” he explained. “I suggested they come for a visit.”

Padmé lifted her eyebrows. “Now?” she asked. “Do you think that’s such a good idea with us embarking upon a war against the Empire?”

Anakin shrugged. “We have our family on board,” he pointed out. “Why shouldn’t he? Besides, somehow I don’t think the Empire will be much of a match for this vessel, do you?”

“If they combine forces they will,” she replied.

“They won’t have a chance to do so, Angel,” he told her as they walked along in the corridor. “I don’t intend to give them a chance.”

Padmé nodded her understanding, not sure she liked the ruthless implications behind his words. But still, she knew that in war ruthlessness was sometimes required. Anakin Skywalker was the greatest warrior the galaxy had ever known; she had to trust that he knew what he was doing.

Rebel Command Ship

“Commander, we have a message coming in from the Endor System,” the young communication officers informed Mon Mothma.

She looked over at her comrades with a sense of expectation. “Put in on the screen,” she commanded.

Commander, this is the Executor, Admiral Piett announced.

“Hello Admiral,” Mon Mothma replied. “What news?”

Our objective has been met, he told her with a smile. *The Death Star has been destroyed.*

Mon Mothma smiled. “Well done, Admiral,” she said.

I wish I could take credit for it, Piett replied. *But it was Anakin’s plan. He led a squadron of TIE fighters to take out the only destroyer in the vicinity enabling us to attack the Death Star unhindered. It was brilliant.*

“He is a gifted tactician,” Mon Mothma concurred. “We are lucky to have him on our side.”

Indeed, Piett replied. *We will be in contact soon once we’ve left the Outer Rim. Piett out.*

Mon Mothma turned away from the screen. “Well?” she said. “Does that make you feel more justified in your decision?”

Bail Organa nodded. “Yes,” he said, “I suppose it does. I just hope he was careful; we don’t need the rest of the Imperial fleet coming after us.”

“Anakin knows what he’s doing,” Mothma said. “I think that this attack proved it.”

Organa hated to admit it, but she was right. It was obvious that the addition of the *Executor* under the command of Anakin Skywalker was an invaluable addition to the forces of the Rebel Alliance. *Just so long as Skywalker is able to keep the emperor from discovering the ruse,* he reflected. *Because if he does, we’re all doomed.*

Star Destroyer Executor — Twelve hours later

It had been six months since Firmus Piett had seen his wife and daughters, and so their reunion was a warm one. Once they had left the planet surface, Piett took great pleasure in escorting his family around the *Executor*, giving them the grand tour. He was most anxious to introduce them to his commander and his family. Piett had come to admire the Skywalker family tremendously, and felt privileged to be serving along side such fine individuals.

As for Anakin Skywalker, what Piett felt towards him was nothing short of hero worship. Piett had always held a sneaking admiration for Darth Vader, even though he had never so much as met the man. He admired Vader’s leadership abilities, his tactical skills and his battle savvy. Anakin Skywalker possessed all of those same qualities, of course, but without the

ruthless, dark nature that had defined the Dark Lord. Skywalker was noble, heroic even, and loved his family above everything. He was just the sort of man that could, and hopefully would, end the conflict that had plagued the galaxy for two decades. Piett felt honored to know him, and to have a part in Anakin's plans.

"This ship is huge!" Piett's youngest daughter, Deirdre, as they walked through the corridors.

"The biggest in the fleet," Piett told her proudly.

"But no longer part of the fleet," his wife, Malani, pointed out. "At least, not the Imperial fleet."

"No," Firmus said. "That is true. You never liked the Empire much any way as I recall, my dear."

Malani smiled with a shrug. "No," she admitted. "I didn't. But mutiny? Firmus, are you sure this is the right thing?"

"Without a doubt," he replied. "And when you meet the Skywalker family, I'm sure you will agree with me."

The Piett family tracked down the family of Anakin Skywalker to the large refectory where they were sharing a meal together. Anakin looked up when he saw his first officer approaching and smiled.

"Am I to assume that these are the Piett ladies?" he asked as Piett and his family reached them.

Firmus smiled. "Yes, indeed they are," he said, turning to his family.

"Please join us," Padmé said, smiling also.

"Yes, please do," Anakin said, standing up.

"Thank you," Malani said, charmed at once by the couple.

"Anakin and Padmé, I'd like you to meet my wife, Malani," Firmus said at last. "And my daughters, Ylla, Mina and Deirdre."

"It is a pleasure to meet you all," Anakin said, shaking hands with them. 'I've heard a great deal about you.' He turned to his own two children. "And these are our children, Luke and Leia, and their good friend, Han Solo."

"Very nice to meet you all," Leia said, shaking hands with the three ladies.

Luke, however, found that he was somewhat tongue tied as he shook hands with the Piett women. He'd had next to no experience with girls, and found himself quite captivated by the eldest of the three Piett daughters, eighteen year old Ylla.

Ylla was certainly a beautiful young woman; she had shoulder length, wavy hair that was golden in color, and eyes that were the most brilliant shade of green Luke had ever seen. She smiled at Luke as they shook hands. "It's nice to meet you, Luke," she said. All Luke could do was smile at her, cursing himself for being such a dufus.

"It is so wonderful that you have been able to come and visit Firmus this way," Padmé said. "I know it means a lot to him having you here."

"I understand we have you to thank for that, Anakin," Malani said. "Firmus told me that it was your suggestion."

"It was," Firmus said. "And might I add a very good one," he added, smiling at his wife.

"Families should be together," Anakin said, looking at his own wife. "I know I am a much better, much stronger man having mine close by."

Malani nodded. She was starting to understand just what her husband meant about the Skywalker family. They truly were remarkable.

Just then Anakin's comlink sounded. "Excuse me," he said. He activated the mechanism. "Yes?"

Sir, the team you sent to the Gordian Reach has returned. They have the stones.

"Very good," Anakin replied. "Tell them to meet me on the bridge in ten minutes."

Yes sir.

"Stones?" Padmé asked. "What stones would they?"

"Kunda stones," Anakin replied. He looked at Leia. "Someone needs to build a lightsaber."

Leia's eyebrows lifted. "Me?" she said. "I'm going to build a lightsaber?"

Anakin nodded. "Actually, we both are," he said. 'I refuse to continue using a Sith blade,' he explained. "It's time for a Jedi blade once again."

"I couldn't agree more," Padmé said with a smile.

"I like Malani Piett," Padmé told Anakin as she brushed her long hair in preparation for bed. "She's everything I imagined she would be. And their girls are just lovely."

Anakin, who was sitting up in their bed watching her, smiled. "I know someone who was quite taken with one of the Piett girls," he commented.

Padmé looked over her shoulder at him. "Who?"

"Luke," Anakin replied, his smile growing. "He was literally speechless when he met the eldest girl, Ylla. I could feel his pulse racing from across the table."

Padmé smiled in response. "Really?" she said. 'I would love to see Luke with a nice girl like her,' she said, resuming her brushing. "I often worry that he feels left out, now that Leia and Han are so close."

"I don't know about that," Anakin said. "I think Luke is pretty happy just the way things are. He is very focused on his training, much more so than I was when I was a padawan," he said.

"You were a married man when you a padawan," she reminded him. "That was rather a large distraction."

Anakin lifted his eyebrows. "Distraction?" he repeated. "Is that what you think yourself?"

Padmé laughed as she set down her brush and stood up. “No, but you know what I mean. Luke may be a happy person, but that doesn’t mean he wouldn’t love to find some nice girl to settle down with. Personally I think it would be a wonderful thing,” she declared as she climbed into bed with him. “What a wonderful idea you had suggesting Firmus bring his family on board.”

Anakin nodded, the smile fading from his face.

“What?” she asked. “What’s wrong?”

He turned to her. “Nothing,” he said, lying down. “I’m just tired.”

Padmé frowned. “Don’t tell me it’s nothing,” she said. “I’ve noticed that you’ve been contemplative all day. What’s on your mind?”

Anakin sighed, realizing his wife knew him far too well for him to hide anything from her. “I’ve just been thinking about the battle today,” he said. “Battle, wrong word. The slaughter, that’s more like it.”

Padmé moved closer to him. “You did what you had to do, Ani,” she told him, framing his face with her hands. “You realize that, don’t you?”

Anakin nodded. “Yes, I do,” he said. “I just can’t stop thinking about the families of all the men who perished,” he said.

“I know,” she said. “You are a man of great compassion and conscience; it is natural that you would feel that way.”

Anakin nodded. “I don’t want to kill any more, Padmé,” he said softly. “There is already too much blood on my hands.”

His words took her by surprise, and caused a constriction in her throat. He obviously still carried around a great deal of guilt for the lifetime he spent as Darth Vader, and probably always would.

“You have been given the chance to atone for that,” she reminded him. “And you will, you will free the galaxy from tyranny and restore freedom to millions of beings. Don’t forget that, Anakin.”

He smiled at her. “I don’t know how I lived so long without you in my life,” he told her. “Thank you, Angel, for keeping me focused on the positive. I do tend to dwell on the negative; I suppose it comes from spending half my life in darkness.”

Padmé stroked his face softly. “I will never let that darkness claim you again,” she told him resolutely. “You belong here, with me, with our children, and nothing and no one will ever take you from us again.”

Anakin could only nod and hold her close, feeling that with her at his side, the Darkness would never win over him again.

Chapter 77

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Luke stood in the turbolift, heading for the *Executor*'s recreation level. Of course, it had not been designated as such when the mighty ship had been under Imperial control. During those dark days it had been referred to as the PTF — Physical Training Facility. The facilities were excellent, providing state of the art fitness equipment and programming, several gymnasiums and swimming pools. Luke and his sister had spent many hours in the gymnasiums sparring with one another and engaging in the vigorous physical training that was a huge part of their Jedi training.

The door opened and Anakin joined Luke in the lift.

"Good morning Dad," Luke said.

"Morning Luke," Anakin replied. "You're up early. Where have you been?"

Luke shrugged. "No where special," he replied. "I'm on my way to the gym."

Anakin smiled. Luke was simply too easy to read. He knew without a shadow of a doubt that he had been out roaming the vast ship in the hopes of seeing a certain Miss Ylla Pielt again. "I see," he said at last. "I'm heading there myself. I like to start each day with a workout."

"Me too," Luke replied. "I don't suppose you brought your lightsaber with you?" he asked with a grin.

Anakin smiled as he pulled back his cloak to reveal his lightsaber clipped to his belt. "Master Obi-Wan used to scold me terribly if I went anywhere without it," he explained. "I suppose old habits die hard."

Luke laughed. "I guess so."

The turbolift stopped, and father and son stepped off and proceeded down the corridor.

"I'd like you to be present when Leia and I begin construction on our lightsabers," Anakin told his son as they entered one of the enormous gymnasiums. "You haven't had the chance to go through that experience."

Luke nodded. "I'd like that," he replied. "In fact, I'd like to build one myself if that's okay. This one is yours, after all."

Anakin considered his son's words for a moment. He wasn't sure that he wanted to use the saber he'd owned when he first became Darth Vader. *How much innocent blood was shed with that weapon? How many younglings were slaughtered by that blade?* He thought as he watched Luke take the saber from his belt. *I tried to kill my best friend, my brother with that saber.*

"Dad? You okay?"

Anakin averted his eyes from the saber and met those of his son. “Yes,” he replied. ‘Just... remembering,’ he said quietly. “I like your idea, Luke,” he said, forcing himself to push the dark memories from his mind. “You should make your own lightsaber. It is an integral part of your training, for your weapon ought to be a reflection of you. Even the color has significance.”

“I didn’t know that,” Luke replied, looking down at the weapon in his hand. “I...” he stopped as out of the corner of his eye he caught sight of someone enter the gymnasium on the opposite side of the room.

Anakin could sense Luke’s heart rate accelerate in a matter of moments, and looked over to where Luke’s attention had been diverted only to see Ylla Piett.

“She’s quite pretty, isn’t she?” Anakin commented.

Luke turned to his father. “Sorry?”

Anakin smiled. “You’ve got it bad, don’t you son?”

Luke’s face turned a bright shade of red. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he mumbled.

Anakin put a hand on his son’s shoulder. “I’ve been there,” he said. “I know the signs, Luke. Why don’t you go and talk to her?”

“N-no... that’s okay,” Luke replied. “Come on, let’s go.”

Anakin removed his lightsaber from his belt. “As you wish,” he said. “Let’s begin.”

As they sparred, Anakin felt as though his son’s attention was divided between the mock duel he was engaged in and the door where Ylla had exited the room. It surprised Anakin that Luke was so distracted by a girl after only meeting her once, for he had always figured Luke to be the more serious minded of his two children. *He’s your son, though, remember? Are you really surprised he’d react this way?*

Taking advantage of Luke’s distraction, Anakin easily disarmed his son and held out his hand, bringing the lightsaber to it effortlessly.

“Now, go talk to her,” he told his son. “Because believe me, it will only get worse if you try to deny how you feel.”

Luke was about to offer another denial, but reasoned that it was pointless to do so. It was obvious that he father knew him far too well and was able to read his moods as well as his very thoughts easily. Trying to hide his feeling from him was futile.

“What do I say to her?” Luke asked at last.

Anakin smiled. “You’ll think of something,” he assured him.

“I doubt that,” Luke muttered. “I couldn’t even speak when I met her. She probably thinks I’m a complete loser.”

Anakin laughed. “Women do have that affect on us sometimes,” he commented.

“What did you say to Mom the first time you met her?” Luke asked.

Anakin smiled as he remembered that incredible day so long ago, the day that had changed his life forever.

"I asked her if she was an angel," Anakin told his son. "I'd never seen anyone so beautiful in my whole life."

Luke nodded, not surprised that his father had managed to be charming even from their first meeting.

"And what did Mom say?"

"She called me a strange little boy," Anakin replied with a smile.

Luke laughed. "Oh yeah, you two were just kids when you met, weren't you?"

Anakin nodded. "Yes, I was nine; your mother was barely fourteen. Yet somehow I knew even at that young age that we were destined to be together. When we met again ten years later I was a nervous wreck."

"Were you?" Luke asked. "You?"

"Yes," Anakin replied. 'I remember riding up the lift to her apartment. Obi-Wan was laughing at me for being so nervous. I was sweating and jittery, and when she and I met face to face again after so long, I tried so hard to be smooth.' Anakin smiled at the memory. "Your mother had me tied up in knots from day one, Luke. Trying to ignore the way I felt about her only made things worse."

Luke thought about his father's words. "I just wish I could think of something to say to her that won't make me sound like a complete idiot."

Anakin smiled at his son, and put an arm around his shoulder. "Just be yourself, Luke," he said. "That's all I can tell you. Women respect honesty and sincerity."

Luke nodded. "Okay," he said, suddenly feeling very nervous. "I'll do it."

"Good luck," Anakin said as Luke started walking across the floor.

Luke turned and looked back at his father. "In my experience there's no such thing as luck," he said, imitating Obi-Wan perfectly.

Anakin laughed. "Don't be so sure about that," he called back. He watched as Luke walked away, hoping that his son would not lose courage at the last minute. His thoughts were interrupted by his com link.

"Yes?"

"Ani, it's me."

"Good morning," Anakin said, walking towards the exit. "Miss me already?" he asked with a smile.

Padmé laughed. "Of course. But right now I think you should get up to the bridge. They've been looking for you."

"Okay, I'm on my way," he replied. "Meet me there?"

“Of course. I’ll see you soon.”

Anakin left the fitness facilities and headed for the lift, hoping that whatever it was that required his attention was not bad news.

Padmé looked up from the comm screen as she saw Anakin enter the bridge. He wore his under tunic and a towel around his neck, his hair still sweaty from the work out.

“Did I interrupt something?” Padmé asked, smiling up at him.

Anakin smiled. “Well, not really,” he replied. “I just finished kicking Luke’s behind.”

Padmé raised her eyebrows. “Oh?” she asked. “Not literally I hope.”

Anakin laughed. “Well, his mind was elsewhere,” he replied, sitting beside his wife. “Miss Ylla Piett is far more interesting than fighting a mock duel with his old man.”

Padmé smiled. “She was in the gym too?”

“Only briefly,” Anakin told her, taking one corner of the towel and wiping a trickle of sweat from his face. “She was only in the room for a moment or two, but that was enough to send Luke’s mind into a tail spin. I was finally able to convince him he needed to go find her and talk to her.”

“Good,” Padmé replied. ‘I hope they hit it off,’ she added. “It would be wonderful for Luke to have someone special in his life.”

“Yes, it would,” Anakin replied. “So what was the big emergency?” he asked.

“A message from the Alliance,” Padmé said, keying in the message they had received earlier. “I thought you should see this.”

Anakin turned his attention to the screen where the face of Mon Mothma appeared.

We have lost contact with the planet Alderaan, she began. Viceroy Organa had been unable to make contact with his assistant for more than twenty four hours, and so we sent scouts to the Alderaan System. The planet is currently under blockade, with at least four destroyers in orbit. Please contact us as soon as you are able— Alderaan needs our help.

The transmission ended.

“The emperor has been looking to find a way to punish Alderaan for a long time,” Anakin said at last. “He was thwarted in his attempt to destroy it with the first Death Star; no doubt he was hoping to succeed somehow with the second.”

“Do you think he knows about what happened in the Endor System yet?” Padmé asked.

“I doubt it,” Anakin replied. “We left no one there to send a report. Eventually he will realize what has happened, once communications from the Death Star have gone silent for longer than normal.”

“Perhaps he has already learned what happened and thinks Alderaan is somehow responsible,” suggested Piett. “It could explain this sudden and rather drastic action.”

Anakin nodded. “Palpatine never does anything without a reason. Having said that, however, we are not simply going to allow him to bully Alderaan either.” He turned to the

communications officer. ‘Hail the rebel command ship,’ he ordered. “We need to make a plan.”

“At once, sir.”

Imperial City— Coruscant

Emperor Palpatine sat in deep meditation, swathed in the Darkness that had been the essence of his existence for most of his life. *Something is not right*, he thought darkly. *Something is off...* He could not put into words what it was he sensed; but he felt certain beyond a shadow of a doubt that there was something amiss in the galaxy... *his* galaxy.

Old age was a cruel beast, and even the Sith were not immune to its ravages. Palpatine himself was not even certain how old he was anymore; but there was one thing he was certain of: he was tired. *I need my apprentice*, he thought peevishly. *I need Vader.*

Ordinarily it was Vader who did the investigating, the tracking, the hunting down of traitors; he was good at it and he never failed. Even now Vader was hunting down his own offspring to make as an offering to the Dark Side, and Palpatine had no doubt that he would succeed in finding them. Vader was, after all, nothing if not relentless. *And what if he doesn't want to surrender them to me? What if they refuse to join the Dark Side? Will he side with them against me? Me against three of them??*

Within the black heart that beat in Palpatine's withered, ancient frame, something had begun to blossom that even he would not name. It was something that he had seldom felt, something he hated in others, and refused to accept in himself; but since he had come face to face with a whole and strong Darth Vader, he could not deny it any longer. For the first time in a very very long time, Palpatine was afraid.

Anakin Skywalker had been the greatest Jedi who ever lived, his strength and mastery of the Force was unmatched, his medichlorian count off the chart. Had Skywalker not turned to the Dark Side, he would have proven a formidable enemy. After Mustafar, some of the strength that Skywalker had been born with had been lost, along with much of his body. Palpatine had made sure that those injuries that Vader had incurred on Mustafar were not attended to properly; keeping his servant in a half human state in order to keep him subservient. Palpatine was no fool; he knew that so long as Vader remained half human, his diminished strength posed little threat to him. But now....

Palpatine stood up and began pacing about in his chamber. Vader was no longer half machine. He was whole, and fully human, and his strength had been restored, perhaps even augmented — even in the brief communication with Vader he had sensed that. *Should Vader decide to turn against me, he would be unstoppable*, Palpatine reflected as the cold feeling of fear began to spread throughout him. *I must ensure that never happens... I must take measures to protect myself.*

“Your majesty, still no response from the Endor System,” one of his guards reported, interrupting Palpatine's broodings.

The emperor looked up. “Send a ship there at once,” he said. “I will have Jerjerrod's head mounted on my wall for this,” he snapped.

“At once, sire.”

Chapter 78

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“Concentrate, yes,” Yoda instructed. “Meditate you must before selecting the crystal that will be the heart of your saber.”

Luke and Leia exchanged a look, and then focused their attention on the small stones that Yoda and Obi-Wan had placed on the table before them. Meditation was not easy for either of them; too *much like their father*, Obi-Wan was quick to point out. Yet, both were determined to do their best, realizing that their masters’ expectations were high. They were, after all, the children of the Chosen One; the future of the Jedi Order. Both Luke and Leia realized how important their place in the history of the galaxy was, and were determined not to disappoint their masters or their parents.

Obi-Wan was delighted that Luke had expressed a desire to build a lightsaber of his own. Not only was the exercise an important part of Luke’s journey, but it would mean that the saber that had been his father’s during the darkest time of his life would be retired. Obi-Wan had debated for many years whether he ought to destroy Anakin’s lightsaber, for it represented for him the darkest day of his life, the day he lost his brother. The image of Anakin screaming in agony as the fires of Mustafar consumed him had never left Obi-Wan’s memory, or the images of Anakin slaughtering younglings in the Jedi Temple. That saber had taken many lives, spilled much innocent blood. Obi-Wan sensed that Anakin too harbored ill feelings toward the weapon; for him it represented his descent into Darkness and was a constant reminder of all the innocent lives he had taken.

“Our father told me that the color we chose has significance,” Luke said after a few moments. “What exactly does that mean?”

“Simply put, blue suits a Jedi who focuses on combat,” Obi-Wan explained, “such as your father, while green lightsaber is for a Jedi who focuses on the force. Master Yoda’s lightsaber was green, as was Master Qui-Gon’s,” he went on.

“Red signifies the Dark Side then, I imagine,” Leia said.

Yoda nodded. “Yes Leia,” he concurred. “The symbol of evil it is, adopted by the Sith many years ago.”

“Red represents violence, blood and death,” Obi-Wan added. “No Jedi would ever carry a red saber.”

Luke and Leia nodded. They had both decided upon a color, one that their meditations had leaded them to. They were pleased to learn that they had chosen well.

“Chosen you have?” Yoda asked.

“Yes,” Leia said, looking at her brother. “I think I know what you are going to chose,” she told her twin with a smile.

Luke grinned. "Yeah, well I'd bet a thousand credits on the color you'll pick."

Obi-Wan and Yoda looked at one another with amusement at the competitiveness of the Skywalker twins. *They are their father's children*, Obi-Wan reflected, remembering how Anakin had been at their age.

"I think I too know what color the two of you have chosen," Obi-Wan told them with a smile. "May i?"

"Of course," Leia said with a smile.

Obi-Wan looked at her, stroking his beard thoughtfully. "Leia is very much like her father," he said. "And so I would say blue."

Leia nodded. "You're right," she replied.

"And Luke," he continued, turning to the young man next. 'You are far more cerebral than either your sister or your father,' he said. "So I would say green."

Luke smiled. "You're good, Ben," he said. "That's exactly right."

"Now that we have chosen our crystal, can we get started?" Leia asked eagerly.

"Patience, young one," Obi-Wan replied, putting a hand on her shoulder. "I believe we are about to rendezvous with the Alliance. Why don't we begin when we can dedicate more time to the task?"

"Yes, a good idea this is," Yoda concurred. "A serious job this is. Much concentration it requires."

"I agree," Obi-Wan said.

Luke, Leia do you copy?

Leia activated her comlink. "We're here, Dad."

Are you with Obi-Wan and Yoda?

"Yes we are."

I need all four of you to meet me in the main conference room. Mon Mothma's shuttle is about to arrive.

"We'll be right there," Leia said. She looked up at the others. "Shall we, gentlemen?"

"After you, Princess," Obi-Wan replied.

Lieutenant Keller stood in one of the *Executor's* enormous hangar bays as the Lambda class shuttle slowly made its way inside. There was nothing unusual about the landing, for Imperial shuttles were commonly used for short distance travel. What was unusual about this arrival, however, was the occupants of this particular shuttle. It was not often that members of the Rebel Alliance boarded an Imperial Star Destroyer as guests. Prisoners yes, but guests—never.

Keller stood at attention as the shuttle docked. He had been in almost constant contact with the Alliance, keeping them abreast of the *Executor's* movements. He enjoyed this new

responsibility, and looked forward to meeting with the rebel leaders in person once again.

“Welcome to the *Executor*,” Keller said with a smile as Mon Mothma and Bail Organa descended the ramp.

“Thank you, Lieutenant,” Mon Mothma replied, looking around in awe at the enormity of her surroundings.

“Quite an impressive vessel,” Bail remarked.

“It is,” Keller replied. “I would be happy to give you a tour once your meeting with Lord Vader has concluded.”

Mon Mothma’s eyes widened in surprise. “Vader??” she echoed. “Did you say Lord Vader?”

“Relax, Commander,” Keller assured her. “We are using his Sith name only as a security precaution. I assure you, he is not Darth Vader.”

“That’s a relief,” Organa muttered.

“Now, if you’ll follow me, I’ll take you to the conference room,” Keller said.

“By all means, Lieutenant,” Mon Mothma replied.

Padmé entered the conference room to join her husband. Anakin watched her as she approached the large table, sensing that she was upset about something. They had contacted Doctor Deece on Polis Massa days earlier and had been waiting for a reply from her. That morning their reply had come.

“What’s wrong?” Anakin asked his wife as she sat down beside him.

Padmé looked up at him, and he could tell that she had been crying.

He frowned and reached over to put his hand on her. “Angel, what is it?”

“A message came through just after you left earlier,” she told him. “A message from Polis Massa.”

A sinking feeling started growing within Anakin’s heart. “What did Dr. Deece say?” he asked.

Padmé’s eyes filled with tears, despite her best efforts to keep them in control. “She said that...that the drug I’d been forced to take all those years results in permanent infertility in ninety-eight percent of cases,” she told him. She brushed a tear from her face. “So that means we won’t have any more children,” she finished softly.

Anakin squeezed her hand, his heart aching from the pain he felt emanating with her. “It’s not impossible, Angel,” he told her gently. “Ninety-eight percent still leaves two percent left,” he reminded her.

“Ani, I’m forty-seven years old,” she replied. “Even without the drugs destroying my body for twenty years, conceiving a child would be challenging. The two factors combined....” She stopped again, too overcome by her grief to continue.

Anakin got up off of his chair and went to her. He crouched beside her chair and put an arm around her. "Padmé, if there's anything my life's journey has taught me, it's that anything is possible, even when it seems impossible. We can make this happen, Padmé, I know we can. It just means we'll have to make a more concerted effort, that's all," he said with a smile.

Padmé looked up at him and smiled through her tears. "You think so, do you?"

Anakin nodded. "Absolutely," he said. He kissed her cheek. "I have foreseen it."

"And what exactly have you foreseen?" she asked, brushing her tears away.

"I have foreseen me changing diapers," he told her with a grin.

Padmé laughed. "You've got that right," she told him.

Anakin's smile grew, happy to see that she had risen above her grief. *She always was incredibly strong*, he reflected. The doors slid open to reveal Luke, Leia, Yoda and Obi-Wan. Anakin stood up.

"Good you're here," he said. "I believe Mon Mothma should be here very soon."

Luke and Leia knew that their parents had been engaged in an intense conversation, but didn't have the time to ask them about it.

They didn't have to wait long before Lieutenant Keller arrived, followed by the two rebel leaders. Leia embraced her adoptive father warmly, and then all of them took a seat around the large table.

"Now, tell us all you know about the blockade on Alderaan," Anakin began.

"Our scouts tell us that the Imperial ships have been in orbit for at least three days," Organa spoke up. "And that is when we lost contact with Alderaan."

Anakin nodded. "Have you made contact with any of the ships?" he asked Organa.

"We've tried," Mon Mothma replied. "But they refuse to acknowledge our hails."

"Probably because they cannot justify their presence there," Leia spoke up. She looked at her father. "Don't you agree?"

"Yes," Anakin replied. "Until the emperor has instructed the commanders of those vessels what to say, they will not return communications."

"It sounds like Palpatine is trying to force a confrontation," Padmé said. "But why?"

"Mistrusts you, he does," Yoda told Anakin. "Testing you he is."

"If that is the case, then we must proceed very carefully," Mon Mothma said. "Because if he even suspects that we have joined forces, he will destroy us."

Organa snorted. "He hasn't been able to destroy the Rebellion for twenty years," he pointed out. "What makes you think he could do so now, especially since it has become stronger?"

"Do not underestimate the power of the Emperor," Yoda cautioned. "Capable of anything, he is. Without conscious, without honor he is."

“I’d have to agree,” Anakin said. “He is capable of anything. Our plan must be perfect.”

“Then let’s get started,” Padmé suggested. “We haven’t time to spare.”

Chapter 79

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Captain Darius Crazell marched about on the bridge of his ship, the Star Destroyer *Accuser*. Everything was going as planned. The blockade was effectively smothering Alderaan, preventing both communication and transportation to and from the planet surface.

So far there had been no resistance whatsoever from the occupied Alderaan people. They were, however, known to be a peace loving people, and possessed little in the way of weaponry. *Pacifists*, Crazell thought derisively. *No wonder the emperor holds this planet in such contempt.*

The emperor had given very little in the way of direction with regards to this blockade. All they had been told was they were to jam all communications, destroy any vessel that tried to leave the surface, and wait for further orders. So far it had been easy, and, if truth be told, rather boring. Crazell found himself wishing for a little more to do. He could only inspect the men under his command so many times. They were as bored as he was, and had the time to make sure they were doing their job well.

"Sir, we have a message coming in from the *Engager*," announced the communications officer.

"Oh?" Crazell said, pleased for the distraction. "What is it?"

The officer listened to the earpiece in his ear, a frown forming on his face. He looked up at his commander. "Sir, he says that there are a large number of Rebel ships entering the system!"

Crazell's eyes widened in surprise. "What?" he exclaimed.

The comm. officer nodded. "Yes," he said, continuing to listen. "At least twenty ships, sir. The *Engager* is asking for our help, sir."

Crazell's frown deepened upon hearing this. He didn't know what to do: the emperor had made it clear that the blockade was to continue until he decided to call it off. But the *Engager* was alone on the edge of the system with a veritable armada bearing down on them; surely that changed things. Surely they needed help.

"Hail the *Intrepid*," he said at last. "I need to speak with Captain Norvall."

"Yes sir!"

Crazell clasped his hands behind his back nervously, suddenly wishing for the boredom of an uneventful day once again.

Luke found himself excited at the prospect of the approaching battle. Not that it would be much of a battle, he reasoned. No doubt they would not be able to divert all four of the destroyers from Alderaan; they were hoping for two, three if they were really lucky. But even three destroyers against twenty two Rebel ships would not be much of a contest.

“Commander Skywalker!”

Luke turned to the communication officer. “What is it?”

“Sir, we have enemy ships heading our way,” the young woman replied with a smile. “They took the bait.”

Luke smiled. “Fantastic,” he said. He looked over at his sister.

“Told you he was a genius,” she said with a smile.

Luke nodded. “Yeah, he sure is,” he agreed. He turned back to the comm. officer. “Contact my father on the *Executor*. Tell him the trap has been set.”

“At once, sir.”

Padmé watched as her husband paced up and down the length of the *Executor*’s enormous bridge. The tension was thick as everyone waited. Anakin glanced over at his wife, knowing that she was as edgy as he was.

It was with great trepidation that Anakin had sent Luke and Leia to coordinate the Rebel attack. Cognitively he knew that they were both more than capable of rising to the challenge; in fact they thrived on it. But in his heart he was still a father, and he worried about his two precious children. Having spent a lifetime apart from them, he found it difficult not to be over protective where his family was concerned. Even though Luke and Leia were adults now, he knew that no matter how old they were, he would always feel as though he needed to protect them.

“Lord Vader, a message from your daughter,” the communication officer announced.

“Put her on,” Anakin said, moving over to the comm. station where he was joined by Padmé.

“Leia!” Anakin said, relieved to see his daughter’s face appear on the screen. “What’s going on?”

“We’ve picked up two destroyers on the long range sensors,” Leia reported. “So the plan worked.”

“Excellent,” Anakin replied with a smile. “Think you can handle them?”

Leia smiled. “Yes, I think we’re okay,” she said. “What about you? It will be two against one.”

Anakin lifted an eyebrow. “Not exactly,” he said. “They won’t know what hit them, believe me.”

“I’m sure,” Leia replied. “Good luck, Dad.”

“Thanks Leia,” Anakin replied. “You too. May the Force be with you.”

Anakin looked at his wife, knowing that she was as worried as he was about their children.

“They’ll be fine,” Anakin told her. “They are experienced leaders.”

Padmé nodded. “I know,” she said softly. “That doesn’t mean I’m not going to worry.”

Anakin smiled and stood up. "I know exactly how you feel," he said, bending down to kiss her cheek. "I'm going to brief the pilots. Coming?"

Padmé stood up. "Yes," she said. "I need to be sure you and Han don't get into an argument," she added with a smile.

Anakin laughed. "That won't happen," he said. "Not this time at least. With Luke gone I need him to lead the squadron."

"And he'll do a great job," Padmé replied. "Almost as great as you," she added.

Anakin smiled and took her hand. He brought it up to his mouth and kissed it. "Let's go," he said as they made for the exit. "Piett you have the bridge!" he called over his shoulder.

"Yes sir!"

"General Kenobi, we have enemy ships in sector 342," the tactical officer of the *Reliant* informed Obi-Wan.

Obi-Wan nodded his understanding. "Raise the shields," he said. He looked over at Yoda. "Here we go again," he quipped.

It wasn't long before the two star destroyers joined the *Engager* on the edge of the Alderaan System. When they arrived, the hapless ship was already under heavy fire from the Rebel fleet and was in distress. Joining in the fighting, the *Accuser* and the *Intrepid* were alarmed by the large number of Rebel ships and the efficiency of their attack. Whoever had organized this strike was obviously well versed in Imperial protocol, as well as a strategic genius. They knew exactly how to split up the blockade, effectively dividing the imperial forces. It had worked exactly as planned.

Meanwhile, on board the *Executor*, everyone waited anxiously to hear from the Rebel fleet. Once phase one of the strike had been accomplished, phase two would commence. The squadron of TIE fighter pilots, lead by Han Solo was already in their ships when the simple message came from the bridge: stand by.

Making a hyper jump that took the *Executor* from the edge of the system to within striking distance of the remainder of the blockade; the *Executor* emerged within visual range of the two remaining Imperial ships.

"Sir! The *Executor*!" shouted one excited young officer when the mighty vessel appeared seemingly from no where.

The commander of the vessel, Captain Needa, breathed a sigh of relief. He had been uneasy since the *Accuser* and the *Intrepid* had left orbit, leaving his ship, the *Avenger* and the *Striker* alone. Now that the flag ship of the fleet had arrived, Needa could breathe easier, knowing that the Rebels wouldn't stand a chance against the Empire's mightiest vessel.

"Hail the *Executor*," Needa said.

"Right away sir."

"Lord Vader, the *Avenger* is hailing us."

Anakin folded his arms over his chest. "Ignore it," he said. He activated his comm. link. "Solo do you read me?"

"Loud and clear."

"It's time. Launch the attack."

"My pleasure, sir."

Captain Needa was puzzled by the *Executor's* silence, and was starting to get an uneasy feeling about the entire situation when an astonishing sight unfolded before his eyes. On the screen before him, he saw what he was certain was the entire compliment of TIE fighters flooding out of the *Executor*.

"What are they doing?" he muttered. "The Rebels aren't here, they're...." he stopped as the cold realization of what was happening hit him.

"Raise the shields! Raise the shields!" he shouted, but not before the first wave of TIE fighters was able to deliver a volley of laser fire upon the two destroyers. Both ships sustained significant damage before they were able to raise their shields.

"Sir, shields are only at thirty percent!" the weapons officer announced in alarm.

Needa wasn't surprised by this; whoever was behind this daring and treasonous attack obviously knew exactly where to target the attack.

"Ready our own fighters," Needa said at last. "We'll have to fight them ship to ship."

"Yes sir!"

Needa knew that they were badly outnumbered even with two ships' compliment of TIE's against the enormous forces of the *Executor*; but he was desperate at this point. "Do your best to target as many of those fighters as you can," he added. "Fire when ready."

"But sir, how are we to tell their ships from our own?" the weapons officer asked.

Oh no, we can't... "Belay that order," Needa said, starting to perspire under the tremendous pressure he was suddenly under. *Damn you Crazell for leaving us like this!* he thought angrily. 'Try hailing the *Executor* again,' he ordered. "Ask them for their terms of surrender."

The officers and men on the bridge were shocked by their commander's order. No star destroyer had ever surrendered, it was simply unheard of. But then again, no star destroyer had ever been attacked by another. Needa was at a loss to understand what was happening, but didn't have time to consider it.

"Sir, the *Avenger* is hailing us again."

Anakin did not reply, his eyes focused on the dog fights in front of him. Solo had impressed him with his skills both as a leader and a pilot. *Seems we do have something in common after all.*

"Time to end this," he said. 'Train primary weapons on the *Intrepid*,' he said. "Maximum fire power."

“Yes Lord Vader.”

Anakin turned away from the screen to look at his wife. “Fire,” he said.

Padmé could see that the actions he was forced to take were troubling to him. As Darth Vader he would not have thought twice about blowing an entire ship from the stars; Anakin Skywalker however had a conscience, and the deaths of so many men weighed heavily upon that conscience.

“Sir, the *Avenger* is signaling their surrender.”

Anakin turned around, surprised by this news. “Surrender?” he asked. His eyes went to Piett’s, whose face bore the same expression of shock as his own.

“They’re on self destruct mode,” Piett said.

“Bring them down,” Anakin said. “Maximum fire power, widest possible spread.”

“At once sir!”

All eyes watched anxiously as the enormous fire power of the *Executor* was unleashed upon the *Avenger*. Everyone knew what would happen should the vessel self destruct: it would become an enormous bomb capable of taking out half of the planet below it.

Anakin watched in silence as the *Avenger* was bombarded, reducing it to rubble within moments, killing each and every officer and crewman on board.

“Recall the fighters,” Anakin said, his voice heavy with regret.

“And what of the enemy fighters?” Piett asked. Anakin looked at him, not saying a word.

“Understood sir,” Piett replied. He turned to the weapons officer. “Destroy the rest of the TIE fighters once our men are on board.”

Anakin turned and walked over to where Padmé stood.

“You saved Alderaan again,” she told him. “You did what you had to do to save them.”

Anakin nodded. “I know,” he said. *So why do I feel this way?* “I’m going to the hangar to meet the men,” he told her, and then walked off the bridge.

Chapter 80

Chapter 80

Imperial Residence— Coruscant

Sarith Kallos usually enjoyed his position. Being the Emperor's personal assistant meant a great amount of prestige, not to mention money. But today was one time when money meant nothing. Indeed, he was quite certain that there was not enough money in the galaxy to make what he had to do any easier.

Palpatine was not an easy man to get along with at the best of times, but when he was in a foul mood, he was positively terrifying. Kallos had checked and rechecked the report he held in his hand. *It cannot be*, he thought in desperation; *it simply cannot be!*

"Enter!" a malevolent voice bellowed from behind the large heavy doors. Kallos took a deep breath and activated the doors. His eyes took a moment to adjust to the dimness of the enormous room as he walked toward the large throne on the far side.

"I have the report from the Endor System, your majesty," Kollo began as he bowed before the galactic emperor.

Palpatine looked at the man before him. He waited wordlessly, knowing that his silence was far more intimidating than any threat he could utter.

Kollos swallowed hard and glanced down nervously at the datapad in his hands. "The scouts we dispatched have sent word. They... they, uh, have reported that the Death Star is... that is to say," he coughed nervously, "it is gone, sir."

Palpatine frowned and leaned forward in his throne to give the man a withering stare. "Gone?"

Kollos nodded, his mouth having gone completely dry. "Yes," he croaked, and then cleared his throat. "Yes, your majesty. It is not there, nor is the *Vengeance*. The scouts did a check of the Sanctuary Moon and found a large amount of debris and," he paused to cough again, "devastation that would indicate a large, uh... a large explosion."

Palpatine did not reply, his mind starting to churn with anger. "Explosion?" he said at last. "Are you telling me that the Death Star has been destroyed?"

Kollos nodded. "It does appear that way, yes, yes sir," he stammered as perspiration started to stand out upon his forehead.

The windows in the room began trembling as room was filled with Dark power. Glass began to shatter as the windows imploded under the tremendous pressure. Kollos ducked and covered his head with his arms, in an attempt to protect himself from the deadly projectiles flying through the room.

After a few moments, the room fell silent once again. Kollos slowly uncovered his head and looked around, astonished to be still alive. He looked up at the emperor and was

unnerved by the look of sheer malevolence on his face.

“What is the status of the blockade?” Palpatine asked.

“We have not heard from any of our ships since the report of Rebel ships entering the system,” Kollos replied. “We have made several attempts to contact them, but so far they have gone unanswered.”

Palpatine nodded the growing feeling of uneasiness within him growing stronger. “Send a ship to the Alderaan System at once,” he commanded. “And have a squadron go to the surface. I want that traitor Organa in this room within twenty four hours.”

“I will see to it at once, Sire,” Kollos said with an elaborate bow. He scurried out of the room, relieved beyond measure that he had surveyed his audience with the emperor.

Palpatine stood up from his throne and walked slowly across the room, seemingly obvious to the glass crunching beneath his boots. *Skywalker*, he thought with a cold feeling deep inside of him, *Skywalker has returned...*

Star Destroyer Executor

Anakin and Padmé stood greeting the TIE fighter pilots as they filed out of the hangar. Many had been lost, but such was the cost of war.

“Do you see him?” Padmé asked as she tried to see beyond the waves of pilots.

Anakin shook his head. “Not yet,” he said. ‘He’s here, Padmé,’ he told her with certainty. “Don’t worry.”

Padmé looked up at him, knowing that he was undoubtedly right. His insight was above question.

“Solo is far too resourceful to be killed in a dogfight,” he added for good measure.

Padmé smiled. “It almost sounds as though you admire the man,” she commented.

Anakin smiled. “Let’s not get carried away, shall we?”

It was at this point that the very man they were looking for appeared. “You see?” Anakin said, “I’m always right.”

Padmé shook her head with a smile as she waved at Han, relieved to see him for herself.

“So the blockade has been lifted?” Han asked as he, Padmé and Anakin stepped into the turbolift.

“More like obliterated,” Anakin replied.

“They tried to self-destruct, but we prevented it,” Padmé explained.

“By destroying them ourselves,” Anakin put in.

Han nodded. “War stinks,” he commented.

“It does indeed,” Anakin replied. “I...” he stopped as he was shaken by a disturbance in the Force. He put a hand against the wall of the turbolift for a moment as the tremendous surge shook him.

“Ani, what is it?” Padmé asked, taking a hold of his arm. “What’s wrong?”

Anakin turned his eyes to hers, unable to voice for a moment just what it was he was feeling.

“Anakin, what is it!?” she cried, alarmed by the expression in his eyes.

“Something has happened,” he said at last. “Obi-Wan...”

Padmé and Han exchanged a look of concern, both knowing Anakin well enough to realize that he was more than capable of sensing the distress of those he loved even at great distances.

“Let’s get to the bridge and find out what is going on,” Padmé suggested as the turbolift came to a stop.

“Lord Vader, we’ve received a priority message from the Alliance ship *Raven Star*,” Piett announced as he saw Anakin. Anakin knew just by the look in Piett’s eyes that the news was not good.

“Relay it,” Anakin said simply.

“It’s General Kenobi,” Piett said. “He’s been seriously injured.”

Anakin nodded. “Bring us to the *Raven Star*,” he said quietly. “Maximum speed.”

“We’re already on our way, sir,” Piett replied.

“Ani,” Padmé said softly, taking his hand.

Anakin looked down at his wife, his eyes reflecting the depth of the pain he felt. “He can’t die, Padmé,” he said, his voice heavy with emotion. “Not now, not after everything we’ve gone through!”

Padmé did not know what to say, her own emotions too great for her to speak. Instead she wrapped her arms around his waist and held him close, praying that the Maker would not take their friend from them.

Anakin and Padmé were met in the hangar of the *Raven Star* by Yoda and a young rebel officer.

“Where is he, Master Yoda?” Anakin asked. “Where is Obi-Wan?”

“Come,” Yoda said simply, and then turned to leave the hangar.

Anakin started after the diminutive Jedi Master, part of him not wanting to come with him, for he knew deep in his heart that coming with him might mean learning the horrible truth that his Master, his brother, his best friend was gone. “Master Yoda,” he said softly as tears sprang to his eyes.

“Come,” Yoda said again, and started walking out of the hangar. Anakin turned to Padmé, who squeezed his hand tightly. Then they followed him.

Anakin walked through the Rebel ship as though in a dream, the voices around him heard merely as whispers in the distance. He felt his heart rate accelerating with each meter they

covered on the long journey to the medical wing; part of him wishing they would never get there, part of him wanting to get the excruciating wait over.

Finally they reached the medical wing, and Yoda stopped. He turned and looked up at Anakin. "Go to him, Anakin," he said simply.

Anakin looked down at Yoda, and then back at Padmé. She nodded, releasing his hand. Anakin took a deep breath to steady himself, and then entered the room. His eyes searched the room briefly, only half noticing the medical droids who were busily attending to other injured members of the ship's crew. And then he saw Obi-Wan.

Slowly he walked over to the medical gurney where his life long friend lay. Until that moment Anakin had not wanted to believe that Obi-Wan was truly hurt; but now there was no denying it.

"Obi-Wan, can you hear me?" he asked, looking down intently at his friend's face.

Obi-Wan was very weak, too weak to even open his eyes. His body was connected to life support equipment and a monitor that kept a close check of his vital signs.

"This can't happen, not to you," Anakin said, looking down at the face of his friend, so still and pale. 'You can't leave me now! I can't do this without you, Master! I need you!' he cried, clenching his fists in frustration and anger. He reproached himself bitterly for putting his elderly friend in such danger. "I never should have involved you in this," he said aloud. "What was I thinking?" A surge of anger flooded Anakin, the sight of Obi-Wan clinging to life reminding him all too vividly of the last moments of his mother's life. *I lost her....and now I will lose Obi-Wan too... the closest thing I ever had to a father...*

"I failed you, Master," he said, looking down at Obi-Wan again, as tears pricked his eyes. "I should have protected you, but I didn't! I let those Imperial bastards do this to you! But they will pay, I won't let them get away with this, Obi-Wan. I swear to you, they will pay for what they have done!"

Padmé waited outside the door, feeling torn. She knew how much Anakin was suffering, and wanted to be there for him; but she herself had yet to master her own grief. Like Anakin, she had known Obi-Wan since she was a child, he had been a good friend to her, a protector to both her and her children. And now his life was hanging in the balance.

"Mother?"

Padmé turned, startled by the sound of her son's voice. Luke and Leia knew in an instant what had happened.

"It's bad, isn't it?" Luke asked.

Padmé could only nod, her tears streaming down her face.

Luke closed his eyes, the sorrow filling him utterly. Leia stood as though in shock, looking wide eyed at her mother. "He can't die!" she cried. "I won't believe it!"

"Leia, sweetheart," Padmé said, reaching for her daughter, 'I'm sorry,' she said softly. "I know what Obi-Wan means to you, to both of you."

"Where is Dad?" Luke asked at last, his eyes brilliant with tears.

“He’s in there, with Obi-Wan,” Padmé said, indicating the door.

Leia did not wait another moment and burst through the door and into the room. She looked around the room, brushing the tears from her face, stopping when she saw her father. She ran to him, desperate to comfort him, to seek comfort from him; needing him to help her make sense of the crushing loss that was consuming her.

“Daddy,” Leia cried as she reached him.

Anakin looked up. “Leia,” he said softly, turning to her. He held open his arms as Leia threw herself into his embrace. Anakin held her tightly, wishing he was strong enough to offer her words of comfort, but knowing somehow that for now all she needed was his warm presence, his reassuring embrace and his unconditional love to support her.

Leia looked up at him. “He’s going to be alright, isn’t he?” she asked desperately. “Please tell me he’s going to be alright!”

“I wish I could,” Anakin said quietly. ‘He’s very weak, and has suffered a great deal of trauma.’ He frowned again as his own sense of guilt reared up again. “I should never have asked him to get involved in this,” he said. “If he dies....”

“Don’t you dare blame yourself for this!” Leia cried. “This is the doing of the Empire, Daddy, not you. Besides, you do really think you could have dissuaded Obi-Wan from getting involved?”

Anakin shook his head. “Not a chance,” he said softly, looking back at his friend. ‘I will make them pay, Leia,’ he said, his words sending a shiver down her spine. He turned back and looked at her. “The Empire will pay for what they have done here today.”

Leia could see the look of determination in her father’s eyes; but what was more, she could see the anger. At that moment he reminded her very much of the man he had been when they had first met many months earlier on the Death Star. And that terrified her.

Luke and Padmé looked up as the door opened and Anakin and Leia emerged.

“It’s time to end this,” Anakin said, his voice steady and strong once again.

“End this?” Padmé asked. “What do you mean, Ani? You don’t mean...” she stopped as it dawned on her what he was referring to. “You mean to confront the emperor, don’t you?” she asked.

Anakin nodded. “Yes, time to bring this to a head,” he said. “I will not risk any more lives,” he added.

Yoda watched Anakin closely.

“Great anger I sense in you, Anakin,” he said at last. “Do not let your grief over Obi-Wan govern your actions.”

Anakin turned to Yoda with a frown. “You can’t be serious,” he said. ‘After what they did to Obi-Wan, you expect me to show mercy towards those Imperial monsters?’ He shook his head. “No, I will make them pay. I won’t allow them to take one more life, I swear it!”

Luke was about to say something but he stopped when his father walked off. Instead he looked at his mother and then at his sister.

"I'm afraid for him," Luke said. "I'm afraid this will drag him back into the Darkness."

Padmé shook her head. "No, it can't," she said. "We can't let this happen. Master Yoda, we have to stop him!"

Yoda sighed deeply, looking for a moment every day of his eight hundred odd years of age. "Anakin's destiny is to destroy the Sith," he said solemnly. "It is the prophecy."

"I don't care about the prophecy," Leia stated hotly. "I'm not going to let my father be destroyed all over again!" she said, and took off down the corridor after Anakin.

Padmé looked at Luke. "Luke, what are we going to do?" she asked softly.

Luke said nothing, but put his arms around her in an attempt to comfort her. "We won't lose him again, Mom," he said softly. "I promise you."

Padmé closed her eyes against the tears that filled them, taking comfort in her son's reassuring embrace.

Chapter 81

Chapter 81

Leia ran through the corridors of the *Raven Star* after her father. She was desperate to talk to him, to make sure that the darkness she saw in his eyes would not claim him.

Anakin had reached the turbolift and stood waiting for it to arrive. The door opened and he stepped inside. As the doors were about to close, they were halted by someone. Anakin turned around to see his daughter enter the lift, the doors sliding closed behind her.

"I'm glad I caught you," she said, reaching over and activating the lift's brake.

Anakin frowned. "Why are you stopping us?" he asked.

"Because we need to talk," she replied.

Anakin was tempted to bypass the brake and set the lift in motion once again, but he resisted the urge. Obviously his daughter was hell bent on talking to him right here and right now, and the least he could do was listen.

"I'm listening," he said simply.

Leia looked up at her father, not even knowing where to begin. "I'm afraid," she said at last. "Really afraid."

Anakin sighed. "I know you are, Leia," he said. "I am too. I intend to have Obi-Wan brought on board the *Executor* in a medical capsule; we have much better medical facilities...."

"I'm not talking about Obi-Wan right now, Dad," she said, cutting him off. "I'm talking about you."

Anakin frowned. "Me? What do you mean?"

"Dad, I'm afraid you are going to turn back to the Dark Side," she said, trying not to let her emotions get the better of her. "I'm afraid that your anger over what happened to Obi-Wan will destroy you."

Anakin did not know what to say in response to his daughter's words. Her reaction shocked him, and yet, he could not deny the anger he felt simmering within him.

"I can't believe you would think such a thing," he said. "You of all people should know better!"

Leia could see the hurt in her father's eyes; but she couldn't concern herself with hurting his feelings right now. She knew she needed to be brutally honest in order to make him see reason.

"Perhaps it is because I know you so well that I can see it," Leia countered.

"See what?" Anakin challenged. "What is it that you think you see?"

Leia took a step closer to him, willing herself not to be intimidated by him. "I see Darth Vader," she said simply.

The look in her father's eyes told her that she had hit home.

"What did you say?"

"You heard me," she replied, summoning her nerve. 'I know what Obi-Wan means to you,' she said, taking his hand. "I love him too, and I'm angry over what happened to him just as you are."

"So what is your point?"

"My point is, you can't let this anger destroy you," she said. 'You told me about how Grandma died, and what it did to you. Your nightmares about Mom dying only exacerbated things. Now you're afraid of losing Obi-Wan; please don't let this fear start you down the Dark Path once again,' she said, looking up at him. "I love you too much to lose you now, Daddy."

Anakin felt his throat tighten with the flood of emotions her words evoked. He took her face in his hands. "You will *not* lose me, Leia," he told her. "I promise you."

"I know you don't want to," she replied. "I know the last thing you want is to become Darth Vader again. But you know yourself how dangerous anger can be, Dad. You know that it has already destroyed you once."

Anakin nodded. "Yes it has," he admitted. 'That is how I know it won't happen again. I have done something no other person has ever done, Leia; I have returned from the Dark Side. I know better than anyone of its dangers. I promised you and Luke and your mother that I would never leave any of you again, and I meant it. The Darkness will *not* destroy me, Leia,' he averred. "Rather I will be the instrument of its destruction. I *will* destroy the Sith, I promise you."

Leia nodded. "Just promise me something," she said.

"What is that?" Anakin asked.

"That you will take a few days to cool off before you confront the emperor," she replied. "I believe what you are saying, truly I do. But right now, at this moment, I can feel how angry you are. And when you are this angry, you don't always act rationally."

Anakin lifted an eyebrow. "Really," he commented.

Leia smiled. "Yes, really," she said. "I know this because I'm the very same way. And since you and I are so much alike...."

"I see," Anakin said. He sighed and folded his arms over his chest, looking at her intently. "Seems you've appointed yourself my special guardian," he commented, a hint of a smile on his face.

Leia nodded. "Yes, I have," she replied, folding her arms as well. "Any objections?"

Anakin shook his head. "None," he said. He thought for a moment, the smile on his face growing wistful. "I'll just bet you were a regular little firecracker when you were a little girl,

weren't you?"

Leia laughed. "Now why would you think that?" she asked. "I was a proper little princess, I'll have you know."

Anakin nodded. "Yes, I'm sure you were," he replied. "Perhaps Senator Organa can verify my suspicions."

The look of surprised disbelief on his daughter's face caused Anakin to laugh.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I can't seem to resist teasing the people I love," he told her.

Leia smiled. "So I've noticed," she said. She reached over to reactivate the lift's controls. "Maybe we ought to get this thing moving before people start to worry."

Anakin nodded as he watched her start the lift up once again. "Thank you Leia," he said.

She looked back at him. "What for?"

"For loving me enough to be honest with me," he replied. "For worrying. I know that without you I never would have had the strength to abandon the Dark Side. It has been your constant love and support that have kept me in the light."

Leia smiled. "You're my father," she said softly. "Of course I would love and support you. I would do anything to keep you from the Darkness."

Anakin nodded and then as the lift doors opened, turned to see Luke and Padmé standing before them.

"What's going on?" Luke asked, looking from his father to his sister.

Anakin and Leia looked at one another. "We were having a little chat," Leia said.

Padmé looked at Leia and then at Anakin. She could see that whatever Leia had said to him it had calmed him tremendously.

"Everything okay?" she asked as she and Luke stepped onto the lift.

"Yes they are," Anakin said. 'I think we need to working on our lightsabers,' he told his children. "A few more days and we ought to be finished," he added, looking at Leia with a smile.

"Sounds like a good plan," Luke said. "What do you think, Leia?"

Leia looked from Luke to their father and smiled. "I think it's a perfect plan."

Imperial Palace-Coruscant

Palpatine sat drumming his fingers on the armrest of his throne. He had been waiting for nearly twelve hours for the report from the scout ship that had been dispatched to the Alderaan System. The longer he waited, the darker his mood became. He was beginning to suspect that something was terribly amiss when his comm. screen indicated that a message was coming through.

"What is it?" he snapped. "I don't like to be kept waiting!"

The hologram of the unfortunate individual whose job it was to contact the emperor bowed. "Your majesty, we have made a complete sweep of the Alderaan System. There is no trace of any of the four ships who were assigned to blockade Alderaan."

"What do you mean?" demanded Palpatine. "What happened to them?"

"It is our belief that they were destroyed," the envoy replied. 'There is a large concentration of Rebel ships in the sector,' he continued. "The *Executor* has engaged them, however," he reported. "So it seems that..."

"What did you say?" Palpatine interjected. "Did you say the *Executor*?"

"Yes sir," the messenger replied. "We spotted it clearly in the vicinity of the Rebel ships."

Palpatine frowned. "And you say it was engaged with the Rebel ships?" he asked. "You saw the battle?"

The envoy's eyes darted nervously. "Well, no," he replied. "We didn't actually witness a battle..."

"So how do you know they were engaged in a battle??" Palpatine demanded angrily.

"But sire, why else would the *Executor* be in such close proximity to the ships of the Alliance?"

"Why indeed," Palpatine muttered, his suspicions about Vader growing by the minute. 'Bring the Viceroy of Alderaan to me at once,' he said. "I want answers, and I will get them at any cost."

The envoy's expression grew fearful. "I'm afraid that isn't possible sir," he said. "The viceroy was not on Alderaan. We did a thorough search."

Palpatine's face twisted with rage. *Skywalker and Organa are plotting against me... I'm certain of it now...*

"Find him," Palpatine said at last. "I will deal with that traitor once and for all."

"Yes sir," the messenger replied, and ended the transmission quickly before the emperor decided that the dire news he had delivered merited a death sentence.

I will deal with you too as well, Lord Vader, he thought darkly. *I can forgive betrayal only once. This time you will have to pay for it.*

Chapter 82

Chapter 82

Obi-Wan was brought to the *Executor* in a medical capsule a few hours later. His condition was still quite serious, but Anakin felt convinced that the medical facilities aboard the star destroyer were far better than any the Rebel Alliance could offer.

Anakin had thought a great deal about the conversation he'd had earlier with his daughter. It had unnerved him that he'd come so close to the Dark Side that she had seen it in his eyes. For the second time it was because of Leia's unwavering faith in his humanity that he had avoided falling into the abyss once again.

He looked at her now as she and Luke set to work on the next stage of their light saber construction. The look of determination on her face as she carefully set the crystal in place reminded him so much of her mother when she was determined to overcome a problem.

"Here's where it gets tricky," Anakin cautioned as he set the blue crystal in his own weapon. "The crystals must be lined up precisely or else you'll blow your head off the first time you activate the matrix."

"Okay..." Luke said uneasily. "And how exactly do you do that?"

Anakin smiled. "Use the Force," he said simply. "Can you do it?"

Luke and Leia looked up at one another briefly. Leia nodded. "I think so," she replied.

"No Leia, do it, don't just think you can," Anakin advised.

"You sound like Master Yoda," Luke commented.

Leia laughed.

Anakin smiled. "I suppose there's a first time for everything," he said. 'Now concentrate,' he told his children. "The Force will guide you." *I do sound like Yoda*, he thought, *or maybe Obi-Wan*. The thought of his friend brought a fresh wave of anxiety with it. Obi-Wan still had not stabilized, and the more time that passed, the graver his condition grew. *He has to recover*, Anakin thought desperately. *He can't die, I won't let him...*

"Dad, concentrate," Leia said, sensing whither his thoughts had wandered.

Anakin nodded and returned his attention to the task at hand.

Executor Refectory— Later that evening

"It's no big deal, really," Luke insisted.

"It is so," Leia said. She turned to her parents. "Don't you just think she's perfect for Luke?"

Padmé and Anakin exchanged a look. "Who are we talking about here again?" Anakin teased.

"You know very well who, Dad," Leia said with a smile. 'Ylla Piett!' she turned to her twin. "They had their first date last night, didn't you Luke?"

Luke's face was growing progressively redder as the conversation continued. "Well, I guess you could sort of call it a date, kinda," he mumbled.

"Come on, kid," Han said, slapping Luke on the back. "Don't be so modest! I saw the way she was looking at you. She likes you, man. I know it."

Luke couldn't help but grin a little at this. "You think so?" he asked.

Leia nodded definitely. "Absolutely," she averred. 'She was hanging on every word he said,' she told her parents. "It was so cute!"

"Cute?" Anakin said. 'It was cute?' He looked at Padmé. "I thought babies were cute," he said.

Padmé laughed.

"You know what I mean," Leia said good-naturedly. "So when are you going to see her again?"

Luke shrugged. "I don't know," He said. "Whenever."

Leia rolled her eyes. "Luke, you need some serious coaching in the dating department," she said.

"I can give him a few pointers," Han offered with a smile.

Leia snorted. "You? It took you two years to admit that you liked me," she retorted. "I don't think you're the prime candidate for the job, fly boy."

Han opened his mouth to protest but decided against it. She was right, after all.

"Well I think the best thing to do is to let thing progress naturally," Padmé said. "She does seem to like you, Luke," she added with a smile.

Luke looked at his mother. "I think she does," he said. 'I don't know,' he added, running a hand through his shaggy locks. "I don't want to get my hopes up."

Padmé frowned, wondering how her son had come to be so guarded. "Luke, you have a lot to offer any girl," she said, reaching over and taking his hand. "Don't ever forget that. Any girl would be lucky to have your heart."

Luke smiled at his mother. "Thanks Mom," he said. "That's a really nice thing to say."

"And I mean every word of it," Padmé said, reaching over to give Luke a kiss on the cheek.

"So how are the lightsabers coming along?" Han asked.

"They're almost finished," Luke said. "Just a few more last minute touches and they'll be complete."

"Doesn't it usually take weeks to finish a lightsaber?" Padmé asked.

“Usually,” Anakin said. “But when have you ever known me to take that long?” he asked her with a smile.

Padmé laughed. “Yes, I should have realized your children would be just as quick,” she said.

Anakin smiled. “I’m afraid neither of them inherited your patience, Angel,” he told his wife.

“So it seems,” Padmé replied, looking at their children with a smile. “I was in visiting Obi-Wan earlier,” she told her family.

“Any change in his condition?” Leia asked.

Padmé shook her head. “No, I’m afraid not,” she replied. “The medi-droids are monitoring him closely and I told them to let us know the moment there is any change.”

“He has to pull through,” Luke said, pushing the food on his plate around. “I can’t imagine not having him around now.”

Anakin nodded. “He’ll pull through,” he said. “He’s too stubborn not to,” he added with a smile.

Luke looked up at his father and smiled. “Yeah, he is that,” he agreed. “Master Yoda said as much.”

“Did he?” Leia replied. “I can’t imagine that.”

“Well he didn’t it in so many words,” Luke explained. “I kind of read between the lines.”

“Something you need to do a lot of with Yoda,” Anakin replied. “He likes to talk in riddles.”

“I thought he did that just to see if I was listening,” Luke said with a smile.

Anakin and Padmé laughed. “Could be Luke, you never know with him.”

Lord Vader, this is the bridge.

Anakin activated his comlink. “Go ahead, Keller.”

Sir, the Emperor is demanding that you make contact with him.

Anakin looked at his wife, the light hearted mood that they had been enjoying shattered with a few simple words. “I’ll be right there,” Anakin said. He stood up. ‘Get those lightsabers ready,’ he told Luke and Leia. “I have a feeling you’re going to need them sooner than we expected.” He looked at his wife.

Luke and Leia nodded and then watched their father retreat from them.

Padmé watched him too, the fear that she had felt building within her for days now rising another notch. She turned back to her children. “Don’t let anything happen to him,” she said softly.

Luke and Leia each took one of their mother’s hands. “We won’t,” Luke told her.

“We promise,” added Leia, leaning over and giving her mother a quick kiss on the cheek. “Come on Luke, we have work to do,” she said as she stood up from the table.

Luke joined her, leaving Han and Padmé alone.

“The emperor doesn’t stand a chance against the three of them,” Han said, knowing what was on Padmé’s mind. “You know that, don’t you?”

Padmé looked at him. “Yes,” she said. “But that doesn’t make me feel any better about this.”

Han nodded. “I know what you mean,” he said quietly.

Anakin made his way to the audience chamber, summoning the Force to calm his heart that was pounding like a trip hammer. There was no doubt in Anakin’s mind that Palpatine had learned of the destruction of the Death Star; by now he may even know of the failure of the blockade around Alderaan as well. He would be looking for answers, which, Anakin reasoned, was why he was summoning his right hand at this time. *He expects me to have answers for him*, Anakin realized as he entered the audience chamber. *And I’ve none to offer.*

Kneeling on the large holopad embedded in the floor, Anakin prepared himself as the enormous holographic image of the emperor materialized before him.

“What is thy bidding, my master?” Anakin asked, the words leaving a bitter taste in his mouth.

“You are looking well, Lord Vader,” Palpatine began amicably in an attempt to catch Anakin off guard.

“Thank you my master,” Anakin replied simply.

“Your wife is taking good care of you I presume,” Palpatine commented.

“She is,” Anakin replied.

Palpatine nodded, frustrated at not being able to glean more of a reaction from him. And yet, he knew the reason why. *This is not Vader*, he thought, carefully shielding his thoughts; *this is Skywalker, I have no doubt of it now.*

“Tell me, Lord Vader; how goes the search for your children?” Palpatine asked.

“Slowly,” Anakin replied noncommittally. ‘The Rebels are very clever, my Master,’ he said. “They continue to evade us.”

“Apparently so,” Palpatine replied sourly. “And now they have destroyed the Death Star,” he said, watching his servant closely for his reaction.

“They must have had spies aiding them,” Anakin replied. “How else could they have learned of its location?”

“Indeed, or even of its existence,” Palpatine commented.

Anakin realized that he’d blundered; Darth Vader knew nothing of the Death Star, so if he were to show any hint of knowledge of its existence, he would be implicating himself in its destruction.

“We received a distress call from the station,” Anakin said, recovering quickly. “But by the time we were within striking distance of the Sanctuary Moon, it was all over.”

“I see,” Palpatine replied, more convinced now than ever that the man before him was Anakin Skywalker and not Darth Vader. ‘I would like you to come to Coruscant,’ he continued. “I would very much like to see your lovely wife again,” he added. “It has been far too long.”

Anakin had to fight hard to keep his thoughts and emotions in check at hearing this.

“Of course,” he said simply, managing a hint of a smile. “I’m sure she would enjoy seeing you again as well.”

Palpatine smiled. “Splendid,” he said. “I shall expect you both within forty eight hours. Don’t disappoint me, Lord Vader.”

Anakin bowed low as the holograph flickered out of sight. He stood up and stared at the wall where the image of the ghastly monarch had just been. . *I will **not** bring my wife to you, **Master**,* he thought bitterly. *Not in a thousand life times...*

Chapter 83

Chapter 83

The next twenty-four hours were busy ones for the crew of the *Executor*. While the ship made its way to the Imperial capital, Anakin and his children worked feverishly to finish their lightsabers. The tension was thick as the confrontation drew closer. Anakin had devised a plan that was as daring as it was brilliant.

"I don't know, it all sounds rather dangerous," Ylla said as she and Luke sat together in the ship's vast observation deck.

"Maybe," Luke concurred. "But there's no need to worry. I'm confident my father knows what he's doing."

"I'm sure he does," she replied. "But aren't you afraid, Luke? I know I would be."

Luke shrugged as he looked up at the vast expanse of stars above them. "Maybe a little," he said. "But I'm pretty good at taking care of myself."

"Don't be so modest," Ylla said, putting a hand on his arm. "I can't believe you're training to be a Jedi! That is so amazing!"

Luke smiled. "Yeah, it is pretty cool," he admitted. "I never dreamed I would get a chance to be a Jedi."

"My father told me that your father was a great Jedi hero in the Clone Wars," Ylla said.

"He was," Luke replied. "I'm very proud to call him my father."

"I'm sure," she responded. "Just as I'm sure he must be proud of you as his son," she added with a smile.

Luke fought hard not to blush, but he couldn't help it. Little did he know that it only made him more adorable in Ylla's eyes.

"Luke, are you blushing?" she teased.

"No," Luke said, only blushing more. "Jedi don't blush."

Ylla laughed. "I see," she said. She leaned over and planted a quick kiss on Luke's pink cheek. "Luke Skywalker, you are simply adorable," she told him softly.

Luke turned and looked at her with a smile. "Thanks," he said. "I mean, I'm glad you think so, uh, I mean... oh forget it," he said, leaning toward her and kissing her softly.

The sick bay hummed quietly with the sound of machinery as Anakin entered the intensive care wing.

"May I help you, Lord Vader?" the medi-droid in attendance asked.

"How is General Kenobi?" Anakin asked. "Has there been any change in his condition today?"

"Actually yes, sir," the droid replied. "His vital signs are considerably stronger today. We expect to take him off life support within the next twenty hours."

Anakin smiled. "That is fantastic," he said. "So he is expected to make a full recovery then?"

"We expect so, my lord, yes," the droid replied.

Anakin nodded. "Excellent," he said, feeling a huge weight lifted from his heart. "Continue to monitor him closely."

"Of course, sir."

Imperial Center— Coruscant

Palpatine had watched the progression of the *Executor* from the moment it had entered the system. He had done his utmost to establish a psychic link with his one time apprentice, but Vader's mind was closed to him. *That is because he is no longer Vader*, he reasoned. *And he has the arrogance to think he can fool me.*

"Sire, there is a message coming in from the *Executor*," one of Palpatine's guards informed him.

"Put it through," Palpatine said, turning in his throne to view the incoming message. Within a few seconds a small holograph of Vader appeared. To Palpatine's surprise, Vader's wife was at his side.

"My master, we have entered the Coruscant System and will be arriving at Imperial Center within three hours," Vader reported.

Palpatine nodded. "Excellent," he replied. "I am looking forward to seeing you both very soon."

Vader did not reply, but merely bowed as the transmission faded out. Palpatine turned in his seat. "I'm looking forward to it most eagerly," he said with a smile.

Admiral Piett stood on the bridge watching as the shuttle drew closer to the planet below. He could not help but feel nervous about what was about to take place. Piett knew the emperor well enough to realize the potential danger that faced Anakin, for despite appearances to the contrary it was entirely possible that the emperor knew of Anakin's ruse. Piett had come to greatly admire Anakin and his family; the thought that they could be walking in to a trap filled him with a cold sense of dread.

"How long before we hear from them?"

Piett turned to see his eldest daughter standing beside him.

"Ylla, you shouldn't be here," Firmus told her.

"I know," Ylla replied. "I'm just worried, Dad," she added quietly.

Piett nodded. "I know you are," he said gently. "Everything will be fine. Have faith, Ylla."

Ylla crossed her arms over her chest, doing her best not to be afraid. "It's not easy to have faith when someone you care about is in danger."

Putting an arm around his daughter's shoulders, Piett turned his attention back to the view screen, where the shuttle had now disappeared from sight.

Palpatine sat in his throne room, the place where he felt the most omnipotent, and waited for his apprentice to arrive. He smiled to himself, smug in the knowledge that he had outsmarted Vader once and for all.

Closing his eyes, he focused on the distinctive Force presence of his one time protégé, confident that he would be able to predict the precise moment he arrived, and set his plan in motion. He did sense something as he sat in meditation, but it was not the aura of Vader, it was the shock and terror of the dozens of guards who acted as sentry in his palace. Not understanding what the source of their fear was, he opened his eyes in alarm, only to find that the room had been cast into complete darkness. Standing up shakily, he moved cautiously forward, trying to adjust his ancient eyes to the utterly lightless room.

"Guards!" he called out, "what the devil is going on? Guards!!"

He received no response. It was then that he too began to grow afraid.

Slowly the emperor made his way over to the door, using the Force to guide his way. Reaching the door, he opened it, only to find the way blocked by the seemingly dead bodies of the two guards who had been standing sentry mere moments ago. He looked down at them in shock, and then slowly up as he spied a pair of black boots on the floor before him. Looking up slowly, he next saw the glowing blue blade of a lightsaber, pointed at him.

"You'll be pleased to know that I have found my children, my master."

Palpatine looked up into the glacial blue eyes of Anakin Skywalker, fully redeemed, his aura brilliant as the blue blade he held at his master's throat.

"Traitor," spat Palpatine as he straightened up, glancing behind Anakin briefly, where he saw a clone trooper and an elaborately costumed woman.

"You brought your wife to witness your treachery?" he added.

"I thank you for the compliment," she said, and then pulled out a lightsaber to join her father's. "But my mother was unable to make it. She sends her deepest regrets."

"My daughter bears a remarkable resemblance to her mother, wouldn't you say?" Anakin asked.

Palpatine stared in shock at the young woman, astonished at how much she looked like her mother. And then he reacted.

"You! Trooper! Shoot them now! I command you!" Palpatine shrieked at the clone at Anakin's back.

The clone did not comply, but merely removed his helmet. Under it was a young man who looked startlingly like Anakin had at the age of nineteen.

"I'm afraid you have it all wrong your majesty," Luke said, producing his own lightsaber.

“You have underestimated me for the last time, Lord Sidious,” Anakin said, stepping closer to the emperor. “You never dreamed I would see through your lies, did you Master?” he asked acrimoniously. “You never imagined that I would learn the truth about my wife, about my injuries. Well I have, and now I mean to make you pay for all the wrongs you have done my family.”

“You traitor,” Palpatine said again. “You dare to challenge me?? You are an enemy of the Empire! A cowardly traitor that is what you are! Just like your pathetic offspring!”

That was all it took for Anakin to lash out, force pushing the emperor against the doors.

“You are the coward, Palpatine,” Leia said, removing the cumbersome cape she had clasped around her neck. “Using our father to do your dirty work, preying on his fears to make him your slave!”

Palpatine shot a look of utter malice at Leia as he regained his balance. “How touching,” he sneered. “The twins have been reunited with their long lost father, the father who nearly killed them before they were born, the father who tried to choke their mother to death while she was carrying them within her.”

“That was not our father,” Luke countered, doing his best to remain calm. “But the monster you created with your lies and deceit. He is not your slave anymore, Sidious. He is a Jedi once again, just as my sister and I are.”

Palpatine looked at Luke next. “Fools,” he spat. “Your weak, Jedi skills are no match for the power of the Dark Side!” He punctuated his sentence with a blast of Sith lightning which sent Luke stumbling back, the armor he wore having absorbed the brunt of the energy.

“You will not attack my brother again!” Leia cried, rushing forward to attack the emperor. Palpatine raised his hand to her next, only to have Anakin block the bolt of energy with the blade of his lightsaber.

“Your feeble skills no longer intimidate me, Sidious,” Anakin said, forcing the energy back at Palpatine. ‘I am redeemed, I am whole,’ he told him. “And now I will make you pay for the years of Hell you’ve put this family through,” he concluded, drawing closer. “If you intend on defending yourself, do so quickly, for I have no qualms about killing you where you stand.”

“So be it, Jedi,” Palpatine replied coldly as he withdrew his own weapon from under his cloak. He moved towards Anakin with remarkable speed, his forward thrust being parried easily by Anakin’s far more powerful blade. Palpatine grew frustrated, and pushed forward again. His efforts were thwarted again, this time by the blade of Anakin’s son.

Anakin watched anxiously as Luke battled the emperor, doing his best to keep him at bay. Palpatine, however, could sense the young man’s inexperience and pushed him back, forcing Luke to back peddle. Anakin did not want to give the Sith a chance to advance any further upon his son, and brought his own blade to the red blade of his former master.

“Luke, Leia, get out of here,” he said without taking his eyes from Palpatine’s.

“I’m not going anywhere,” Leia said.

“Neither am I,” Luke agreed.

Anakin frowned, growing frustrated that his children were not following the plan that they had discussed. He glanced at them briefly. “Go!” he shouted. “Do it!”

Palpatine took advantage of Anakin’s momentary distraction to repel his blade and deliver a blow that glanced Anakin’s shoulder. Leia moved in quickly and sliced through the emperor’s arm. Palpatine screamed in pain as his lightsaber hit the floor. Anakin moved forward with his son, biting back the pain in his shoulder.

“Go,” he said to his children, “do it now before it’s too late.”

“What about you?” Leia cried.

“I’ll be right behind you,” Anakin replied. “Now do it!”

Luke and Leia looked at one another and then ran from the room, knowing that time was of the essence.

Anakin looked at the emperor who stood slumped to one side, looking every day of his many years.

“I’ve waited a long time for this,” Anakin said. “Die now with the knowledge that your Empire will die with you,” he said, and then drove his blade through the emperor’s body. Palpatine’s eyes bulged momentarily as he mouthed a silent curse at his one time apprentice, and then fell forward dead.

Anakin stood looking at the dead body for a moment, to ensure that he truly was dead, and then turned and bolted from the room.

Han Solo and Chewbacca stood waiting in the corridor, blasters held ready. When they heard the sound of someone running towards them, they stood ready. Seeing who it was, they relaxed.

“About time!” Han declared as he hugged Leia tightly. He didn’t have to say anything else, for she knew just how scared he was. He kissed her quickly and then looked up. “Where’s your father?”

“He’s right behind us,” Luke said. “How long do we have?”

Chewbacca barked an answer. *Two minutes.*

Leia grew anxious. “We can’t leave without him!” she declared. “I won’t leave without him!”

“Sweetheart, you know what your dad told you on the way here,” Han reminded her gently. “This whole thing will be for nothing if we all get blown to Hell.”

Luke and Leia looked at one another anxiously. “We should have stayed with him,” Leia said. “What if he’s hurt? What if...”

“Let’s go,” Anakin said as he joined them, not even stopping. “Time Solo?”

“Less than a minute now sir,” Han replied as they all started running.

“It’s going to be close,” Anakin replied. “Let’s move!!”

Running as fast as they could, the five of them raced through the corridors of the palace towards the landing platform.

“Get us out of here Chewie!” Han yelled as they raced on board.

Chewbacca hit the controls and the shuttle lifted off, just as the entire palace exploded in a giant ball of fire.

On board the *Executor* the explosion was observed by the bridge crew. Piett looked back at Padmé.

“They made it, didn’t they Firmus?” Padmé asked quietly, her entire body rigid with fear.

“Try to raise them,” Piett said tersely.

The communication officer complied at once. “I can’t make contact, sir,” he replied. “There’s no response.”

Chapter 84

Chapter 84

"Well, what do you think?"

Anakin looked up to see Padmé and Leia standing before him. His mouth dropped open when he beheld his daughter, for, thanks to her mother's ministrations, she was the very image of a 20 year old Padmé Amidala.

"Wow," Anakin said softly. "That is....incredible."

Padmé turned and looked at Leia with a smile. "Quite a resemblance, wouldn't you say?"

Anakin nodded. "Yes, it's astounding."

Leia had her hair arranged in an elaborate style much like the ones her mother was well known for and she wore a gown reminiscent of the former Queen of Naboo. It was a perfect disguise.

"Palpatine will be completely fooled," Anakin said. "At least initially."

"Well that's all we need, isn't it?" Leia replied. "Just to get in the door."

Anakin nodded. "Yes," he agreed. "Once we're alone with him, then we will let him in on our little secret."

The door opened and an armored storm trooper entered the room.

"I still can't see a thing in this helmet," he muttered.

Anakin smiled. "You won't have to put up with it for long, Luke," he said. "As Leia said, just long enough to get us in the door."

Luke took the helmet off and set it down. "Good," he said, running a hand through his tousled locks. "The shorter the better."

"I still think you're too short to be a storm trooper," Leia told her brother with a grin.

Luke laughed.

"Am I missing something?" Padmé asked, looking at her children.

Luke and Leia looked at one another. "Well, the first time Leia and I met one another I was dressed like this," Luke explained.

"Why?" Padmé asked.

"He was trying to rescue me," Leia said with a smile. "He did a pretty good job too as a matter of fact."

"Rescue you from whom?" Padmé asked.

"From me," Anakin said, much to Padmé's surprise.

She turned to him. "From you??" she asked. "You... I mean Vader held Leia prisoner?"

"No, he didn't," Leia said before Anakin could reply. "I was being held by Governor Tarkin on board the Death Star, and Darth Vader protected and eventually rescued me," she said, looking at her father with a smile.

Padmé smiled. "You did that?"

Anakin nodded. "I had to," he replied. "I felt a connection with Leia from the moment we met, and did everything I could to help her. Meeting Luke was pure serendipity," he added, looking at Luke.

"It was the will of the Force," Luke said. "That's what I think brought us all together."

"Perhaps you're right, Luke," Anakin replied. "Whatever the reason, I am eternally grateful to the imperial officer who placed the tractor beam on Leia's ship to bring her on board mine," he said, smiling at Leia. "If we had never met, I would have spent the rest of my life in Darkness."

"And I would have spent the rest of mine in that home you found me in, Ani," Padmé put in. Emotions flooded her as she thought all that her family had been through, and what was yet to come. 'I wish this was all behind us,' she said softly. "I hate the thought of this."

Anakin walked over to her and took her face in his hands. "None of us do, Angel," he told her. "But this confrontation has been coming for a long time, there is no avoiding it. The galaxy will never know peace until Palpatine is dead."

Padmé nodded. "I know that, Ani," she said. "In my mind I know it's necessary, but in my heart..." She stopped as the emotions overwhelmed her.

Anakin pulled her into his arms. "I know," he said softly, stroking her hair. "We will not let him win, Padmé, I promise you."

"I know," she replied. She looked up at him and then at their children. 'I have total faith in all of you,' she added. "I just love you all so much that the thought of anything happening to you is too much to bear," she explained as tears filled her eyes.

"Don't worry Mom," Leia said, trying her best not to get emotional as well, "I'll make sure nothing happens to either of these two," she said with a smile.

Padmé smiled. "That's reassuring," she said. "And what about you?"

"Don't worry about Leia," Luke assured his mother. "She kicks my butt on a regular basis now," he said.

Padmé had to laugh, loving both her children immensely for their efforts to calm her fears.

"Lord Vader, this is Pielt."

Anakin activated his comlink. "Go ahead," he said.

“We’ve entered the Coruscant System,” Piett reported. “And are preparing to revert from hyperspace.”

Anakin looked up at his family. “Understood. I’ll be right there.”

“Looks like our moment of truth is upon us,” he said.

Luke and Leia looked at one another, not saying a word.

“I’m going to the bridge,” he said. “Are you coming, Angel?”

Padmé nodded. “Yes, I’m coming.”

Padmé stood on the bridge of the *Executor*, watching as the men scrambled to establish a link with the shuttle. *Was it only a mere day since that conversation had taken place? How could they all be lost when mere hours ago we had all been so happy together?*

“They have to be okay,” Ylla said, clasping her hands nervously before her. “They just have to be!”

Padmé shook herself from her reverie to turn to the young woman. *She loves my son, she thought. She is just as frightened as me.* Walking over to the young woman, Padmé took her hand.

“They will be,” She said. “They will destroy the emperor and all will be well, Ylla. It has to be.”

“Admiral, look!”

All eyes turned to the screen where the shuttle had appeared at last. It was careening wildly, seemingly out of control, as it rode the shock waves of the massive explosion.

“Tractor beam!” Piett shouted. His men reacted quickly and soon the small craft had been caught in the *Executor*’s invisible grasp.

“Establish contact,” Piett ordered next as they watched the shuttle in its fight to keep itself level.

“Unable to raise them, sir,” the communications officer replied. “Far too much interference from the explosion on the surface, sir.”

“Sir, the surface tension on the shuttle is rising,” another crewman announced. “If we don’t get them on board soon they’ll break apart!”

Padmé and Ylla looked at one another in alarm. “Piett, do something!” Padmé cried.

“Bring them in,” Piett commanded. “Carefully now, monitor their hull temperature,” he added. He looked back at Padmé and Ylla, doing his best to appear calm. He knew that the tremendous pressure of the tractor beam coupled with the turbulence of the shuttle was a dangerous combination. If they did not get the small craft on board in a matter of moments....well, he did not want to consider what might happen.

“Prepare to receive shuttle,” Piett ordered as the shuttle grew closer. “Have you been able to raise them yet?”

"The signal is very weak, sir," the comm. officer replied. "But we have been able to get through."

"Thank the Maker," Padmé sighed.

They listened in silence as the static filled the bridge, and then the voice of Han Solo could be heard faintly. "*Repeat — we are breaking up! Get us up there fast....medical team... injuries... do you read?*"

"We read you, Shuttle Reliant," the comm. officer replied. "We will have you on board in twenty seconds."

"Have a medical crew meet them in Hangar..." Piett turned back to the comm. officer. "Which hangar, Phelps?"

"Hanger eighteen, sir."

"Medical crew to Hangar eighteen on the double!" Piett ordered. He looked back at Padmé and Ylla. "Ladies, let's go."

Padmé's heart beat double time as she, Ylla and Piett made their way to hangar bay eighteen. The fact that they were alive gave her some comfort; but the urgency with which a medical team had been dispatched to the hangar was alarming. Who was hurt? How serious was it? Would it be too late to help them?

The medical crew had already arrived at the hangar by the time Padmé and the others had reached it. The shuttle had docked and the ramp was lowered. It was all Padmé could do not to run on board the craft herself to see what was going on. But soon enough there was activity, as the passengers started to emerge. Han Solo appeared first, followed by Chewbacca. Padmé watched with breath held for her family to appear. Luke and Leia appeared next, which left only Anakin. *Anakin is hurt*, she thought with a dull sense of dread in the pit of her stomach. *That is who needs the medical crew...* Before long the medical crew emerged with Anakin in tow. They had him on a medical gurney and floated him down the ramp into the hangar.

"Ani!" Padmé cried as she rushed over to him. "What is wrong?? What happened to him?"

Luke and Leia met their mother and the three embraced tightly. "Thank the Maker you're both alright," she said. "What happened to your father?"

Leia looked at her mother, tears forming in her eyes. "He wasn't strapped in," she said quietly. "He was the last to board the shuttle, and before he had a chance to get strapped in the palace blew," she stopped as her grief overwhelmed her.

Padmé looked at Luke. "You mean when you the shuttle was being tossed around... that he was..." she stopped as she realized what must have happened and suddenly felt as though she was going to pass out. Luke took her hands, as though trying to give her some of his own strength. 'He's going to make it, Mom,' he told her. "He's weathered so many storms in his life; he will get through this one too."

Padmé looked into her son's eyes, Anakin's eyes, and though his words said one thing, she could see the fear in them. "Luke," she said softly as the medics left the room with their

patient. 'I couldn't bear to lose him now,' she said as her tears started. "Not again... not now after all we've been through!"

Luke said nothing, but merely held his mother tightly, doing his best to comfort her despite his own tremendous fear.

"Let's follow him," Luke said at last. "And see what the medics have to say."

Padmé nodded, and let her son take her by the hand. They were joined by Han and Leia. As they reached the door, they were met by Ylla.

"Luke!" she cried, throwing her arms around him. "I'm so relieved you're alright!"

Luke returned Ylla's embrace. "We're on our way up to the medical wing," he told her. He pulled back and looked at her. "My father has been seriously injured," he told her quietly.

Ylla's face fell, and she looked at Padmé. "I'm so sorry," she said.

Padmé nodded, doing her best to remain calm. "Come on," she said. "I need to see him."

The five of them headed for the turbo lift and then proceeded to the medical wing.

Upon arriving in the intensive care unit, Padmé had to hold tightly on to her son's hand for support. Anakin had been hooked up to life support as the medics worked frantically to attend to his injuries.

"How is my father?" Luke asked, making Padmé proud with his calm, authoritative tone.

One of the medical droids approached the group. "Lord Vader has sustained massive internal injuries," the droid informed them. "He has several broken bones and has received severe trauma to his head."

"Ani," Padmé gasped as the droid's words hit her with the impact of a laser. She looked at the droid, her large eyes imploring it desperately. 'He's....he'll be okay though, won't he?' she asked desperately. "You can help him, can't you?"

"Chances of survival are..."

"Don't tell me chances of survival!!" Padmé shouted angrily. "He is the Chosen One! He survived the fires of Mustafar! You *will* help him to survive this too!"

The droid was perplexed by the human woman's emotional outburst, and simply returned to his patient. Padmé shook off her son's hand and approached the bed, needing to see him.

"Lady Vader, please," the droid said.

"Don't call me that," she said flatly, the tears streaming down her face. 'It's Skywalker, do you understand? He is Anakin Skywalker, not Darth Vader.' She looked down at Anakin's face and took one of his hands. "And he will not leave us, he promised," she said softly. "He promised he'd never leave us again, and I believe him." She looked up at the droids surrounding her. "Help him," she said simply, and then she stepped back and let them do their job.

Chapter 85

Chapter 85

The ensuing hours passed by with agonizing slowness as the droids worked frantically to save Anakin's life.

Padmé and her children waited in the adjoining room, none able to sit for more than a few moments at a time. Ylla and Han remained with the family, offering them support as best they could. Firmus Piett was also present, waiting anxious for word on his commander who had also become his hero in a remarkably short time.

"Does Obi-Wan know?" Luke asked his mother.

Padmé looked at her son and shook her head. "No," she replied. "I don't want to tell him yet. He only just regained consciousness a few hours before you returned. He's in no condition to hear such a thing."

"He will be able to sense it soon any way," Leia remarked. "The two of them are so close."

Padmé nodded with a sad smile. "Yes, they have been close for a very long time," she said. 'More like brothers than simply friends.' She looked towards the door that lead to the intensive care unit. "I wish they would let us know what is going on," she muttered. "This waiting is killing me."

"We have the best medical facilities in the fleet," Piett told her. "If anyone can help him, they can."

This offered the family of Anakin some comfort; though nothing would truly set their minds at ease until the one they loved was out of danger and in their midst again.

Suddenly an alarm was heard, followed by a flurry of activity. Padmé and her children watched in silent fear as an additional group of medical droids rushed into the intensive care unit.

"What is going on!?" Padmé cried, rushing after them.

The door slid open and Padmé could see the medical team working frantically over Anakin. The heart monitor that he was attached to was the source of the alarm that had sounded moments earlier.

"Ani!" Padmé screamed as she saw the monitor's screen. Anakin's heart had stopped.

Anakin found himself in a place that was filled with bright white light. He felt completely at peace, his body seemingly made of the same white light that surrounded him. He walked along, not knowing where he was going, not really caring. Ahead of him a figure appeared, and his heart swelled when he recognized who it was.

"Mom!" he cried. "Is it you? Is it really you??"

Shmi smiled her face radiant. She was whole again, unbroken, unmarred and glowing with health. "Yes Ani, it's me," she replied.

"How is this possible?" Anakin asked. "You died! I held you in my arms as you died!"

Shmi brought a hand to his face and softly touched his cheek. "I know," she said.

Anakin did not understand for a moment, but then the realization dawned on him.

"I'm... I'm dead," he said at last.

Shmi nodded. "You died on the operating table," she explained. "But it's not your time Ani. You need to finish what you began. You must go back."

Anakin nodded as thoughts of his family came to his mind. Padmé...

"Your family needs you," Shmi told him, reading his mind easily.

"I know," Anakin replied softly, anxious all of a sudden. He could only imagine the crushing grief they must be feeling at this moment. And yet, the thought of leaving his mother again broke his heart.

"I've missed you Mom," he told her, feeling his eyes fill with tears.

Shmi smiled. "I'm very proud of you, Anakin. You have become the man I always knew you could be."

Her words moved him too much to allow him to respond, so he only nodded in response.

"Now go back to your family, Anakin," she told him as she started to pull back from him. "Go now before it is too late to return. And remember that I love you, Ani."

"I love you too Mom," he called back to her as she receded into the light once again. He was unable to move and could only watch as she disappeared. The light began to bleed away until he was in darkness again. And then he heard her voice.

"Anakin don't leave me!"

He fought against the lethargy in his broken body to open his eyes. The bright light assaulted them, and all was confusion for a moment. But then he felt someone take his hand, and he knew who it was. He turned his eyes to see her face. "Padmé," he said his voice barely audible.

Padmé could not control the tears that streamed down her face. "I'm here, Ani," she said, squeezing his hand. "Stay with me, Ani."

"I promised I would, didn't I?" He replied, trying to smile.

Padmé half laughed half sobbed at his comment. He closed his eyes again as the weakness filled him once again. She looked up at the droids. "You must help him," she implored.

"We'll do everything we can," they assured her.

Padmé nodded, and stepped back away from the bed, where she was supported by Luke and Leia who had also been present during Anakin's crisis. She turned to them and saw that they were as distraught as she was.

“He made it back to us, Mom,” Luke told her, taking her gently by the shoulders. “He will make it through this, I know it.”

Padmé allowed her son to lead her out of the room again while the medi-droids attended to Anakin. Leia stayed back, watching them from the corner of the room as they fought to save her father’s life. She felt as though she were in the midst of a terrible nightmare, that the events of the past forty hours were simply too horrific to be true. She knew that she would never forget how helpless and terrified she was during the ordeal in the shuttle, how desperately she wanted to help her father, but was unable to do so. *He can’t die, not now, not after we have finally found one another*, she thought numbly. *How can I go on if he dies? He is a part of me, my hero, my dearest friend...* Leia brushed tears from her face, the fear and despair overwhelming her. She was trying to be strong for her mother’s sake; but the thought of losing her father was beyond her ability to manage. And then she had an idea.

Leia left the room and headed for the recovery wing of the medical facility, where Obi-Wan Kenobi was. She approached her Master, hoping to find him awake, tempted to wake him even if he weren’t. Obi-Wan sensed her approach and opened his eyes.

“It’s good to see you awake, Master,” she said, forcing herself to smile.

Obi-Wan looked into her face, knowing at once that something was terribly wrong. “What is it?” he asked simply.

Leia, who was as good at hiding her feelings as her father, broke down into fresh tears at his question. “It’s Dad,” she said softly. “He’s hurt, Obi-Wan, very badly hurt.”

Obi-Wan frowned, deeply troubled by this news. “How? What happened? Was it the emperor?”

Leia shook her head. “No, Palpatine is dead,” she replied. “It happened on the way back to the ship.” She then proceeded to tell Obi-Wan about the explosion, and its effects on the shuttle. Obi-Wan listened with a grave look on his face.

“There has to be some way to help him,” Leia said. “Don’t the Jedi have some sort of healing ability?”

Obi-Wan nodded. “Yes, but only a few are trained to use it,” he explained. “I’m afraid neither Master Yoda nor I are so trained,” he informed her regretfully.

Leia was greatly disappointed to hear this, but it did not deter her. “I want to try, Obi-Wan,” she said at last. “My father and I have a very close connection; surely I can do something to help him.”

Obi-Wan smiled. “I’m sure you can. Let’s talk to Master Yoda and see what he thinks.”

Leia smiled, a glimmer of hope finally making its way into her heart.

Chapter 86

Chapter 86

News of the emperor's death spread quickly across the galaxy. Theories aplenty were bandied about with regards to the mysterious circumstances surrounding the death of Palpatine, but no one could find any clue as to who the assassins were, for all traces of evidence were lost in the enormous explosion that destroyed the imperial palace.

Palpatine's death acted as a rallying cry for the Rebel Alliance, who redoubled their efforts to release the empire's stranglehold on the galaxy. Lieutenant Keller had resumed his position as liaison between the Alliance and the *Executor*; but in the light of the serious injuries that had befallen Anakin Skywalker, all activities had been temporarily put on hold. The Rebel leaders realized that Skywalker was the key to uniting the two warring factions; without his leadership, peace may not been easy to come by. And so they waited like the entire crew of the *Executor* in the hopes that good news would soon be forthcoming.

Meanwhile, on board the aforementioned star destroyer, a team of clones had been dispatched to the surface below. Their mission was to go to the Jedi Temple, which still stood, though abandoned and empty for so many years. They had been instructed by Master Yoda to find any and all data files that pertained to the use of the Force for healing purposes. It was a long shot, but at this point it was about all they had.

Padmé, Luke and Leia had spent virtually every moment at her father's side since his surgery had concluded. The droids had managed to repair much of the damage, but Anakin was still in critical condition.

Leia had sat at her father's side without more than a few short breaks for more than two days. She wished fervently that she had been more attentive to Obi-Wan's instruction on mediation now, but she had never quite managed to get into it. *Just like him*, she thought looking at her father's face. *I'm so much like him; perhaps that is why we are so connected.* She picked up his hand, fighting against the grief that swelled as she recalled the many special moments she had shared with him. Despite having only known one another a relatively short time, they had grown close, more close she realized than she had ever been with Bail Organa, who had raised her since she was an infant. Leia had often wondered what it would have been like having Anakin as her father from those first days; she couldn't help but think that he would have been a doting father, indulging her and Luke completely, spoiling them rotten. Leia smiled at the thought of him giving her piggy back rides, reading her bedtime stories, or teaching her and Luke how to fly a speeder for the first time. *I missed out on so much*, she thought angrily. *All of us did...*

"Leia, honey why don't you get some rest?"

Leia looked up to see her mother and brother. Padmé and Luke both looked as worried and tired as she herself felt. "I can't sleep, Mom," she told her softly. "I've tried."

Padmé nodded, and put a hand on her daughter's shoulder. "You and your dad are so close," she said.

Leia nodded as she felt the tears spill out of her eyes. "I miss him," she said quietly. "I don't know what I'll do if he doesn't make it, Mom," she said, brushing the tears from her cheek.

Padmé shook her head, her own tears springing to her eyes. "Don't even think it," she said. "He will make it," she averred.

"He promised he'd never leave us," Luke put in, not allowing his own grief to get the best of him. "And I believe him."

Leia looked back at Anakin. "Tell me something, Mom," she said. "Was he happy when you told him you were expecting Luke and me?"

Padmé was taken aback by her question. "Yes," she replied at once. 'He was ecstatic,' she recalled with a smile. "He used to talk to you and Luke all the time," she added.

Luke smiled. "Did he?"

Padmé nodded. "Yes," she said. 'He was convinced I was carrying a girl,' she told Leia. "Although I was sure I was carrying a boy. We didn't know there were two of you."

"He knew you were carrying a girl?" Leia asked softly.

"Yes," Padmé replied. "It seems you two had a connection even before you were born."

Leia nodded, her mother's words only making her tears come more. "I wish I'd known him before," she said, "both of you. If only things had been different..."

Padmé wrapped her arms around Leia and held her close. "I know," she said softly as she stroked her hair.

"We all wish that, Leia," Luke added. Sensing someone enter the room, Luke turned, as did Leia. Both were surprised to see Obi-Wan walking slowly towards them. Yoda was at his side.

"Obi-Wan!" Leia said, standing up to greet him. She embraced her Jedi Master warmly. "Sit down," she instructed.

"Are you sure it's alright for you to be out of bed?" Padmé asked.

Obi-Wan smiled as he took the seat gratefully. "Now now ladies," he said. 'No need to fuss over me.' He looked up at Anakin, sadness filling him. "How is he?" he asked softly.

Padmé sighed. "He's alive," she replied. "Still in critical condition."

"Did you have any luck retrieving that data from the Temple?" Luke asked them.

Yoda nodded. "Yes," he replied. "Information we have now for you, study it you must. Help your father it will." He extended a hand to Luke, a data disc in it.

Luke took the disc from him, and then looked at his twin. Leia felt a feeling of hope starting to blossom within her. "We will dedicate every moment I have to this," she said.

Luke nodded in agreement. "Between the two of us we will bring him back to us."

Yoda nodded. "Help you, we will," he said.

Luke and Leia spent the ensuing days working closely with Yoda as they pored through the data files retrieved from the Jedi Temple. They learned a great deal about the legendary and awesome powers of the Jedi Healers. According to the data, these specialists used the power of the Force to diagnose and treat the ailments of their patients. Jedi who were not healers however, did have the ability to access this power. Initiates in this skill required the use of meditation in order to treat injuries, but once an aptitude had been attained, faster regeneration was possible, without need of meditation. These greater levels were also able to mend far more severe injuries; injuries like those Anakin had suffered recently. This information gave Luke and Leia hope; they were now more determined than ever to help their father.

"If I understand this correctly, it seems as though Dad can use the Force to induce self healing as well," Leia commented. "Do you think he is aware of this?"

"Perhaps," Obi-Wan replied. "I'm afraid your father has never been one to take the time to learn the more cerebral aspects of the Force," he added.

"Is that what you did, Ben?" Luke asked.

"Yes," Obi-Wan replied. "It requires a deep level of meditation in order to allow the body to heal. I'm not sure Anakin is capable of it."

Leia frowned. "If he knows it means his life, he will do it," she said. "We just have to let him know somehow."

Yoda nodded. "Communicate with him you must," he said. "Combine your efforts you must to do so."

Luke and Leia looked at one another. "Let's do it," Luke said. "You ready?"

Leia nodded. "Absolutely."

The next twelve hours were arduous for Luke and Leia as they sat in deep meditation at their father's side. Padmé was present as well; she did not begin to understand the awesome power that her children were attempting to use, but trusted that they would be able to do it. She watched them as they sat with eyes closed, a look of tremendous concentration on their faces. *If anyone can help him, they can*, she reflected. *They must help him... I can't go on without him...*

Memories of her life with Anakin flashed through her mind as she sat in silence waiting for a miracle. She remembered the day they met like it was yesterday; the unusual boy who had asked her if she was an angel. Even then she could sense how special he was, she could feel the connection with him. And when they had met so many years later, the chemistry between them had been undeniable. She had tried for weeks in vain to deny how she felt about him, but it was pointless. Padmé couldn't help but smile when she remembered a day long ago on Naboo, when they had returned there for a second honeymoon....

We continue to follow the gently winding path up into the hills, stopping at last when we reach the top. The view is spectacular.

"Now, isn't that beautiful?" I say as we stand and admire the glorious scene below us.

"It is," he agrees, standing behind me and wrapping his arms around my waist. I lean against him, and for a moment we simply drink in the beauty before us.

"I wish we could just stay here forever," I say softly. "Never return to Coruscant, to the war, to our duties; just remain here and live a quiet life of obscurity."

"That would be like a dream," he tells me; pushing my hair away from my neck so he can kiss it. "Do you think anyone would notice if we just disappeared?"

"I'm afraid so," I reply with a sigh. 'You're the Hero with no Fear, Ani,' I remind him. "Remember?"

"I'd be content just to be your hero, Padmé," he tells me. "Your love is all I need. The rest doesn't matter much to me."

I rest my head against his shoulder. "If only life could be so simple," I say. "But I suppose our lives will never be ordinary."

"No," he agrees. "But while we're here at least we can pretend," he tells me.

I nod. "Yes, you're right," I agree. I turn to him with a smile. "Although there is certainly nothing ordinary about you, Anakin Skywalker," I say, running my hands into his long hair.

He smiles as he wraps his arms around me. "No?"

I shake my head. "No, not even close," I replies.

"Well you wouldn't be happy with an ordinary man, would you Padmé?" he ask me. "You're rather extraordinary yourself."

"I wouldn't be happy with any other man, period," I reply. "You are the only man who could make me feel complete. It's like you are a part of me, Ani. I know that sounds strange, but that's how I feel."

He shakes my head. . "No, not strange at all," he tell me, taking my face in his hands. "I know exactly how you feel, Padmé, because I feel the very same way. You and I were destined to be together, Padmé; it's as though the Force brought us together."

I smile, moved by his words. "That's very romantic, Anakin," I tell him, stroking his face softly.

"It's the truth, Padmé," he tells me. "But I'm glad you think so, nonetheless," he add with a smile as he draws closer to kiss me.

Time stands still when I am in his arms. There is no war, there are no responsibilities; all that exists is him and I and our love. How easy it would be to just throw all the rest away and stay here forever with him....

Padmé stood up and paced about in the room, not allowing the memories she was reliving to weaken her. Not all the memories were happy ones, and she would not allow herself to go there. No, that dark day on Mustafar was an anomaly; that was not her Anakin who had lashed out at her so viciously. That was Vader; that was the monster that Palpatine had

created. Her Anakin would never have done that, not without the darkness that Palpatine had lured him into. No, her Anakin was good, and loving, and brave; her Anakin had risked his own life to save the life of their children, he had sacrificed his own happiness to save hers. He was her soul mate, her dearest friend, her lover and confidante. Padmé smiled as she recalled their last night together before he had departed on his mission with the twins and Han. Anakin had always been an incredible lover, but somehow knowing that they were about to be parted had added a sense of urgency to their love making. He had made her feel twenty years younger, the passion between them as raw and all consuming as it had been when they were in their twenties.

“Milady Skywalker, he seems to be responding.”

Padmé was shaken from her memories by the sound of an artificial voice. She looked over to them and saw that the droid was examining the monitor above Anakin’s bed. She rushed over at once. “What is happening?” she demanded.

“As illogical as it seems, he is stabilizing,” the droid replied. “At an amazing rate too. This is unbelievable,” it said, almost sounding human in its tone of voice.

Padmé smiled. “No it isn’t,” she said, looking at her children who were still in deep mediation. “My children are Jedi, they are doing this.”

The droid did not completely understand the words, nor notice the sound of immense pride in her voice; but it accepted what she was saying. There was no arguing with facts, and the fact was Anakin was stabilizing. Padmé took one of his hands and picked it up, bringing it to her mouth. She kissed it softly, watching his face for any signs that he was waking up. “Come back to me soon, Ani,” she said softly.

Chapter 87

Chapter 87

Remaining in a healing trance, a lifetime of memories passed through Anakin's mind. Good memories, bad memories, memories spanning the forty-two years of his life flashed through his unconscious mind as he fought to repair his injured body.

He saw his childhood friends, his mother... he relived beatings at the hands of Gardulla and Watto, saw the jagged outcroppings of Boonta Eve and experienced the thrill of pod racing... and then the day his Angel entered his life, and the ensuing battle... training for the Jedi Knighthood, and the return of the love of his life... marriage, passion, the agony of separation from her... and then the Darkness began... unspeakable acts, unforgivable betrayal followed by the darkest moment of his life... the sight of his Angel begging him to stay with her, the fear in her eyes as he reached out to kill her....

"He is growing agitated," the droid stated flatly as it watched Anakin's vital signs on the monitor.

Padmé frowned. "What is wrong?" she asked.

The droid could not find any reason for the change in Anakin's vitals; but his heart rate and blood pressure had risen considerably.

"Is he in danger?" Padmé asked, afraid to know the answer.

"Not at the moment," the droid replied. "But if these elevations continue to rise, he could be."

Padmé looked at Yoda, who was also present in the room. "What can we do?" she asked him.

"Reliving his life journey, he is," Yoda replied, having sensed the path of Anakin's thoughts. 'Dark times he is remembering,' he added. "A painful journey this will be for him."

"A journey that leads to redemption," Padmé reminded him.

Yoda nodded. "Yes, his journey is far from over," he said. "Need him, the galaxy does."

"We all need him, Master Yoda," Padmé said, turning and looking at Anakin once again. A thought struck her, a memory from long ago, before she and Anakin had even been married. She had found him on the terrace of the lake retreat. He had spent the night having nightmares about his mother, and was deeply troubled. What had he told her when she had started to leave? ***Don't leave... your presence is soothing...*** Anakin had always been soothed by Padmé's presence; would she have that affect on him now even when he was unconscious? It was certainly worth a shot.

She walked over to Anakin's bed and picked up his hand. She held it to her face, forcing herself to calm her own rattled nerves before she attempted to soothe his.

The pain of third degree burns was beyond anything he could ever have imagined, until the droids began to attach prosthetic limbs to the stumps that were left of his own arms and legs... nothing to numb the pain, nor even dull it, helpless to stop them, too weak to fight... Padmé where are you? Padmé, I'm so sorry! Make them stop! Make the pain end!

And then.... a soothing, warm presence entered his consciousness... and the pain went away, and the fear and the sorrow went away, leaving him with a soothing feeling, one of acceptance and love... only one person could elicit such feelings, the one person he had gone to Hell and back for... his angel, his Padmé...

"He is stabilizing," the droid announced. "Remarkable," it added, checking and rechecking the monitor.

Luke and Leia left their meditative state, opened their eyes and looked up at their mother. They had the power to heal their father's body, but only she had the power to heal his soul, as she had done time and time again over the course of their remarkable life together.

"You've saved him," Padmé said, embracing her children tearfully. "I'm so proud of you both! He's going to be alright thanks to you!"

"I think he did a lot of it himself," Luke told his mother. "We only guided him to show him the way to do it."

Padmé nodded, not beginning to comprehend the awesome power that her children and their father possessed. She looked down at Anakin. "Ani? Can you hear me?" she asked, not daring to hope that he could. She and the twins watched Anakin's face intently. After a few moments his eyes began to move slightly under their lids, as though he were trying to awaken from a deep sleep.

"Dad, we're all here," Leia said, taking his hand. "Can you hear us? Open your eyes, Daddy."

Anakin fought against the lethargy that had over taken him, anxious to rejoin his family. Slowly he opened his eyes, and was rewarded with the sight of the three people he loved more than anything in the galaxy.

"Welcome back," Luke said, smiling at his father.

"What happened?" he asked softly.

"The palace blew shortly after we cleared the planet," Luke told him. "Remember?"

Anakin frowned, trying to piece together the events of the past few days. He remembered the duel with Palpatine, racing for the shuttle... but then nothing until this moment. "Is everyone alright?"

Luke nodded. "You were the only one injured," he replied. "You didn't have time to get strapped in."

Yes, *that's right*, Anakin remembered. He looked at Leia next, giving her a weak smile to express his gratitude for what she and Luke had done for him. "You were very strong facing the emperor," he told his children. "I'm very proud of you both." Leia was too emotional to speak, and could only bend down to kiss her father's cheek.

Lastly Anakin's eyes turned to his wife. Padmé smiled at him, squeezing the hand she held in hers. "I knew you'd come back to us," she told him softly.

"I'm afraid you're stuck with me," Anakin managed to say with a smile. "All of you."

Luke and Leia laughed, as the almost unbearable stress of the past forty-eight hours finally fell away, leaving them with the feeling that everything was going to be alright after all.

"That suits us just fine," Padmé replied, bending down to kiss her husband.

"Well look who's finally awake."

Anakin looked over to see Obi-Wan standing at the foot of his bed. He smiled, relieved to see that his oldest, dearest friend was back on his feet. "Look who's talking," Anakin returned with a smile.

Obi-Wan laughed. "You gave everyone quite a scare," he continued, folding his arms over his chest. "I hope you're happy."

"Just wanted to keep everyone on their toes," Anakin replied, closing his eyes once again.

Obi-Wan nodded. He looked at the twins as their father drifted off to sleep again. "You did well," he said. "I'm sure your father is very grateful for what you have done for him."

"We are all grateful," Padmé said, looking at her children with adoration in her eyes.

"Now that the emperor is dead, we must move quickly to bring the rest of the Empire under control," Obi-Wan said. "Before factions begin sprouting up."

"Hopefully now that he is gone they will be willing to consider a cease fire," Leia said, watching her father as he slept. "I would hate to think that after all this the galaxy will still be in conflict."

Yoda nodded slowly. "Obi-Wan is right," he said. "Move quickly we must to sue for peace. Abhors a vacuum, Nature does. With the emperor dead, leadership will be needed. Anakin must be that leader."

Padmé looked at Anakin as he slept. "I'm not sure he will want that responsibility," she commented. "He has done so much already; he wants nothing more now than peace."

"We all want that," Obi-Wan agreed. "But he is the best chance we have of realizing it, Padmé; surely you can see that."

"Yes, I can," she concurred, realizing that the destiny of the Chosen One was far more complicated than simply destroying the Sith. Bringing balance to the Force entailed a great deal more than merely killing Palpatine; it would also mean rebuilding the galaxy, putting an end to the war that had ripped it apart for two decades, and reconciling enemies who had spent a life time trying to kill one another. Not a short order.

"I'm beat," Luke said at last, with a yawn. "I think I'm going to get some sleep."

"Sounds like a good idea, Luke," Padmé said. "You two are both exhausted I'm sure. I'll stay here with your father," she said, looking back at his sleeping face.

"You need to rest too, Mom," Leia pointed out.

Padmé smiled. “I won’t sleep without your dad beside me,” she said. “It’s like part of me is missing.”

Luke and Leia exchanged a smile. The love their parents shared was remarkable and truly awesome.

“Okay,” Leia said, kissing her mother’s cheek. “Just promise us you’ll rest as soon as he wakes up, okay?”

“Okay,” Padmé replied as she sat down on the chair that Luke brought over for her. “Have a good rest.”

Luke and Leia left the room, accompanied by Yoda and Obi-Wan, leaving Padmé alone with Anakin. She picked up one hand and held it to her cheek, fighting the fatigue she felt threatening her despite her denial of it.

Luke and Leia met Han on their way to their quarters. Han embraced Leia tightly, relieved to see the worry gone from her face. “Your dad’s gonna be okay?”

“Yes,” she replied, hugging him back. “He’s sleeping now, but he’s going to be fine.”

Han released her and looked down at her. “That’s great news, sweetheart,” he said with a smile. “Your dad is a pretty amazing guy,” he added.

Luke and Leia looked at one another. “You just noticed that, did you?” Leia asked with a smile.

Han laughed. “Well, I’m a slow learner, remember?”

“Not slow, Han,” Luke said. “Just stubborn.”

Leia laughed, loving the expression on Han’s face.

“Luke!”

Luke turned to see Ylla walking briskly in his direction. “How is your dad?” she asked.

“He’s going to be fine,” Luke replied as Ylla kissed him on the cheek. “He’s pretty resilient,” he added with a smile.

Ylla nodded. “Yes, I can see that,” she said. “So you and Leia were able to help him?”

“I’m not sure how much we did,” Luke admitted. “I get the feeling that he did most of it himself.”

“I’m sure the two of you had a big part in his recovery,” Han said. “You and your Jedi tricks.”

Leia rolled her eyes. “Not tricks, Han,” she said.

Han grinned, loving to tease her. “Yeah yeah, whatever you say, sweetheart,” he said, putting an arm around her and kissing her on the cheek. “You two have anything to eat recently?”

“Not for a while,” Leia replied.

“Well then let’s rectify that,” Ylla said, linking her arm through Luke.

Anakin awoke an hour or so later, already feeling stronger than he had earlier. He smiled when he saw his wife who was sleeping with her head resting on the bed beside him. He sat up and lifted her out of the chair and brought her into the bed beside him, tucking her in the crook of one arm and then pulling up the covers over her. Padmé, although still sleeping, nestled up against him. Soon Anakin was asleep again too, his angel at his side once more.

Chapter 88

Chapter 88

Little by little Anakin's strength returned to him. Once he was on his feet again, he wasted no time in setting a plan of action into motion.

His first order of business was to draw up an official death announcement for the late emperor. Pinning the regicide on disgruntled governors in the Outer Rim territories, he even went so far as to have said governors arrested. It seemed that certain holo messages had been confiscated which were of a very incriminating nature. How the messages' existence was discovered seemed irrelevant in light of the inflammatory and highly insulting nature of the messages. While it was common knowledge that Palpatine was a fearsome man, comparing him to an Endorian blurr seemed rather incendiary.

Having successfully deflected the assassination from himself, Anakin's next step was to assume command of the Empire. He sent orders to the commanders of each sector, summoning them to a meeting. For him it wasn't so much a matter of negotiation with these stalwarts of the Empire; no, in order to affect the changes he planned he was required to be the supreme leader, the unquestioned commander of the Empire. For all intents and purposes, he would be Darth Vader for this meeting; something which did not sit at all well with his family. While they understood the importance of Anakin asserting his authority without dissent, the thought of him assuming the persona of his dark side unnerved them. Truth be told, it unnerved Anakin as well. He had worked hard to destroy any and all vestiges of Darth Vader within him; to have to play the part of the Sith Lord once again was not something he looked forward to.

The summit was due to be held in two days' time as governors from all over the Empire made their way to the *Executor*. The crew of the mighty vessel had worked hard to arrange the security measures for the meeting; they knew their commander's orders well, and were not about to let him down.

The leaders of the Rebel Alliance had been informed of the impending meeting, and invited to attend. Mon Mothma and Bail Organa had returned to the ship in order to be present when the historical meeting took place. Tension was high as all on board waited, hoping that Anakin's plan would be the solution they were all hoping for.

"Ani, come to bed."

Anakin stopped his pacing and looked over at his wife who was already in bed.

"You need to rest," she continued. "Tomorrow is a big day."

"I know," he said, starting his pacing once again. "I'm just going over what I want to say in my head. I'm no politician, Padmé," he told her. "I'm not used to giving speeches. That's more your area of expertise."

Padmé smiled. “Maybe so, but you’re a leader, Anakin,” she assured him. “You were born to lead. Don’t think of it as being a politician; think of it as being a great leader, the one that the galaxy needs to stop the conflict that has ravaged it for two decades.”

Anakin stopped and looked at her. She always knew what to say; somehow she always knew the right words to calm him and soothe his troubled mind and spirit. If he didn’t know better, he’d think she was Force sensitive in her ability to read his moods.

“I will try,” he said at last, sitting on the side of the bed beside her. “Having you by my side will make it easier.”

She smiled, and leaned forward to caress his cheek. “I’m so proud of you, Anakin,” she said softly.

He smiled and picked up her hand to kiss it. “I would never have got this far without you and the kids,” he said. ‘I can’t imagine what the rest of my life would have been like had Leia’s path not crossed mine. I would have spent the rest of my life in darkness, believing that you and our child had died by my hand.’ He stopped and frowned at this sobering thought. “I don’t know how I lived so long without you all,” he told her.

Padmé nodded. “I know,” she said, running her hands into his hair. “But Destiny seemed to have a different path for your life, Ani. You were meant to do just what you are doing now. You were born to do it.”

Anakin pulled her close, taking comfort in her presence, in her love and her support. With her he knew he could accomplish anything, even change the galaxy.

One of the enormous hangar bays had been converted into a conference room to accommodate the hundreds of officers from all over the Empire. Clone troopers stood at attention around the perimeter of the room, ready to quell the slightest hint of a problem. It was Anakin’s hope that merely their presence would be enough to intimidate the visitors sufficiently.

“All set?” Leia asked as she entered the living quarters of her parents’ suite.

“Yes,” Anakin replied. “At least I think so.”

Leia smiled and walked over to him. “You’ve been ready for this day for a long time, I think,” she told him, smoothing down the black tabard he wore.

“To put an end to Palpatine’s Empire? Yes, you’re right about that.” He put up the large hood of his black cloak. “Do I look the part?”

Leia nodded. “A little too much for my liking,” she told him. She looked up at him, wanting to say so much to him, but knowing that time was short. “Dad, do you think that our family will ever get to just be a family?”

“What do you mean?” Anakin asked.

“I mean, do you think there will ever be a time when we can forget about duty and destiny and saving the galaxy, and just do things that regular families do?”

Anakin smiled. “We are not regular people, Leia,” he told her. ‘Our lives are anything but typical. But I know what you mean,’ he said, picking up his lightsaber and clipping it onto his

belt. "And I have to admit that there is a part of me that craves that too. But until the Empire is dismantled, our lives will be anything but ordinary."

"I suppose that is the price of being the family of the Chosen One," Leia commented.

Anakin nodded. "You have all paid dearly for being the family of the Chosen One already," he said. 'I wish sometimes I wasn't the Chosen One,' he admitted to her. "Sometimes I just wish I was an ordinary man," he told her. "Even just for one day, to see what it's like."

Leia smiled. "You'd be bored to tears, Daddy," she told him. "You know it."

Anakin laughed. "Yeah, you're probably right," he said.

Just then Padmé, Luke and Obi-Wan entered the room.

"Everyone is ready, Anakin," Obi-Wan told him. "It's time to get started."

Anakin nodded. "Very well," he said. "Looks like duty calls."

"Destiny calls," Padmé corrected him. She walked over and took his hand. "Ready?"

Anakin nodded. "Yes, I'm ready. Let's go."

Firmus Piett stood on the dais that had been erected at one end of the large hangar, the noise of a hundred different conversations all around him. He glanced at his wrist chrono, wondering where Anakin was. Firmus had spoken to a few of the men, those he knew personally, in an effort to get a feel for what they were feeling and thinking. The individuals he had spoken too all expressed shock at the death of the emperor, though none had seemed terribly saddened by it. They were somewhat surprised that Darth Vader had called a meeting, for they were expecting him to merely assume control and begin issuing orders. A meeting seemed rather diplomatic for a Sith, and it had the men wondering what he was going to say to them.

Piett saw the doors on the far side of the hangar open and Anakin and his wife enter the room. As they did so, a hush fell upon the room as all eyes turned to the pair who proceeded up to the front of the hangar and ascended the dais. The men had heard rumors that Darth Vader's injuries had been repaired; but none of the men had believed it possible. Until now. They could scarcely believe that the handsome man they saw before them now was the same one who had been the masked menace they had feared for two decades. Not only that, the former Senator Amidala was at his side. What this could mean was a mystery to them all.

"What's the mood of the men, Piett?" Anakin asked.

"They seem a little anxious," he replied, "though curious. I'm sure you'll have their undivided attention."

Anakin nodded. "Let's get this over with," he said. He looked at his wife, who stood at his side. "Here we go," he said. He walked to the front of the dais where the voice amplifier had been set up. Anakin activated the device and stood looking at the men while the last of them quieted down. And then he spoke.

"You have been summoned here today for a very simple reason," he told them. "The emperor is dead; it is time to move forward. I am assuming control of the Empire as of this

moment.”

A smattering of murmurs was heard throughout the room at this announcement.

“Lord Vader, do you mean you are assuming the title of emperor?” one officer asked.

Anakin shook his head. “No,” he said. ‘I mean I am calling an immediate cease fire,’ he announced to the astonishment of all. “All hostilities with the Rebel Alliance are to end immediately.”

The immediate response was one of stunned silence, and then there were shouts of disbelief and outrage. The clones at the edge of the room took a step forward, hoisting their blasters menacingly, and soon all was quiet again.

“This is not a discussion, gentlemen,” Anakin continued. ‘I did not call you here to ask your opinion on the subject. I have already had negotiations with the leaders of the Alliance,’ he continued, his words shocking the assembly into silence. “As of this moment, the conflict with the Alliance is over. Any further aggressive action taken against them will be considered treason and shall be dealt with as such.” He waited for a moment to allow this to sink in before continuing. “If you doubt my resolve in this matter, know this: this vessel is under my command. I have the steadfast loyalty of each and every member of this crew. Should you decide to challenge my authority or my decision, you will be forced to deal with not only the Alliance, but this ship as well. Together we will crush any and all opposition.” He stopped again, sensing the jumble of emotions emanating from the assembly. “I present you, then, with a choice: accept this ceasefire and be a part of the new order, or become my enemy. The choice, of course, is yours, gentlemen.”

Anakin stood back and looked at Padmé as the men before them tried to recover from the shock from what they had just heard. Padmé slipped her hand into Anakin’s reassuringly. It bothered her as much as he to be forced to use such strong arm tactics; but they both realized that they had little choice in the matter. This was not the time for negotiation; it was the time for authoritative action.

“I trust that you have seen that there is little room for negotiation,” Anakin said at last. “The destructive conflict must be ended, and this is the only way to do it. Therefore, a treaty ordering a ceasefire will be proffered to the Rebel Alliance. Once this has been established, the Empire will be dismantled, starting with the removal of the regional governors. Control of systems will be returned to the beings inhabiting these systems.”

“Lord Vader,” one brave individual shouted out. “How do you expect to keep control of so many systems without local representatives to govern them?”

“I do not plan to control them,” Anakin replied. “This is the end of tyrannical rule. The Senate will be reestablished, and things will run as they did in the time before the Empire.”

“Are you saying you plan to create a new republic?” one incredulous officer asked.

Anakin nodded. “Yes, that is exactly what I am saying. Twenty years of futile conflict has proven that the Imperial system does not work. It is time for change.”

“But Lord Vader, the Republic failed too,” one officer called out. “What makes you think it will work this time?”

“The Old Republic was sabotaged from within by the very man who was entrusted with its wellbeing,” Anakin replied. ‘Palpatine worked hard behind the scenes to plant the seeds of its destruction, as well as the destruction of the guardians of the Republic, the Jedi. I was part of his plan,’ he continued. “He used me to help him destroy the Republic and the Jedi, and I allowed him to do so.”

“Lord Vader, I think we are all wondering what has brought about this change in you,” another man asked. “For twenty years you were content being the henchman of the emperor; why now do you defame the man you once called Master?”

Anakin looked at his wife, trying to decide if he ought to divulge the whole truth.

“My reasons are my own,” Anakin said at last. “Suffice it to say that I have seen the error of my ways, and want to make amends for it.”

Anakin waited for further dissent, but there was none. No doubt the men were trying to digest all that had been said. “Return to your sectors,” he said at last. “And contact the ships under your command. The ceasefire is to commence immediately. I have representatives stationed in each sector to ensure that this happens. I do not need to explain what will happen should these orders be ignored.”

The men were silent, realizing that Lord Vader was not a man to be trifled with. He meant what he said, every word; and would not hesitate to follow through on his threats should any dissent be demonstrated. Slowly the men began filing out of the enormous room. Anakin turned to Padmé as they did so.

“Well?”

She smiled. “You were great,” she said. “Authoritative without being dictatorial. You’re right, Ani; there is no room for negotiation. Someone has to take charge in order to affect change; who better than you to do so?”

Anakin nodded. “I just hope I haven’t created more problems than solutions,” he said.

Padmé frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I just hope that we don’t end up creating more rebellion this way,” he said.

“I think they know you mean business, sir,” Piett put in. “You made it quite clear what the consequences of dissent would be; and they know you well enough to know that you don’t make idle threats.”

“Let us hope so,” Anakin replied. “I told Mon Mothma and Bail Organa that I meet with them after the summit concluded.”

“I’m sure they will be pleased with what you’ve done here today, Anakin,” Padmé assured him, taking his hand. “You have paved the way for peace in the galaxy.”

“I’m no politician, Padmé,” he told her as they left the dais. “I leave that to you and to them. I’m confident you are more than capable of rebuilding the Republic.”

Padmé smiled. “It’s a big job, Ani,” she said. “I’m not sure I’m up to it right now.”

Anakin frowned. “No? I thought you would jump at the chance to have a hand in this,” he said.

“I do want to have a hand in this,” Padmé assured him. “It’s just that there are other things that will occupy my time now.”

“Such as?” Anakin asked. Padmé smiled at him, stopping him in his tracks. “Padmé, are you trying to tell me something?” he asked, taking her by the shoulders.

Her smile grew as she nodded. “It’s a miracle Ani,” she said softly. “I’m pregnant!”

Anakin smiled, pulling her into his embrace. “Angel,” he said, holding her close. “I knew we could do it, Padmé. It just took a little...persistence,” he told her with a smile.

Padmé smiled. “You’ve always been a persistent man,” she told him.

Anakin laughed, feeling as though the future had just brightened ten fold.

Chapter 89

Chapter 89

Several months later...

Anakin sat in the rocker holding his newly born son in his arms. He could not take his eyes from the tiny boy's face, drinking in every detail of him. He kissed the top of the boy's head, loving the softness of his brown downy hair, the sweet new born baby scent of him. It astonished him that he could be so attached to such a tiny being mere hours after setting eyes on him for the first time.

The door to the hospital room opened and Anakin looked up to see his two elder children walk in. He smiled at them. "Come on in," he said softly, careful not to wake up his wife. "Meet your baby brother."

Luke and Leia approached him and smiled when they saw the sleeping baby in his arms.

"He's so beautiful," Leia said softly, bending to kiss him. "He even smells good."

"How's Mom?" Luke asked, looking back at the bed where Padmé was sleeping.

"She's fine," Anakin said, looking at her. "It was an incredible experience being here with her. I only wish..." he stopped, emotions overwhelming him.

"We know, Dad," Luke said, putting a hand on his father's shoulder.

"May I hold him, Dad?" Leia said.

"Of course," Anakin said. He stood up and placed the small boy in her arms.

"Did you finally decide on a name?" Luke asked with a smile, looking down at his little brother.

Anakin nodded. "Yes, we named him after your grand father, Ruwee. Your mother wanted to name him after me, but I insisted."

"That will mean a lot to Grandma, I'm sure," Leia said, kissing the tip of the baby's nose. "She said she'll be here the day after tomorrow to see him."

"Good," Anakin said. 'She hasn't had a grandbaby to fuss over in a very long time,' he added. He looked up at Leia. "What news on the elections?"

Leia smiled. "Mon Mothma by a landslide," she said. "She will make a great Chancellor."

"I'm sure Mom would have won hands down had she thrown her name in," Luke pointed out.

"Yes, no doubt," Anakin said. "But she had other priorities to consider," he added with a smile.

Luke nodded. "Han and Ylla are outside," he told his father. "Think we could show them the baby?"

"I don't see why not," Anakin said. "Just so long as they don't have any contagious diseases."

Leia and Luke looked at one another, stifling a smile. "No, they're both in good health, Daddy," Leia said. 'Come on, Luke,' she said, walking towards the door. "Let's go show him off."

Anakin smiled as his three children left the room. He walked over to the bed where Padmé was starting to wake up. "Hi," he said with smile.

"Hi," she replied. She looked around. "Where's the baby?" she asked an edge of panic in her voice.

"He's with the kids," Anakin assured her, taking her hand. "They are anxious to show him off to their betrothed."

Padmé nodded. "I guess that's natural," she said.

"With a baby as beautiful as him, absolutely," Anakin replied. "I can't get over how perfect he is," he said.

Padmé smiled. "He is," she agreed.

"Your mother is coming in a few days to see him," Anakin told her.

"Good," Padmé said, sitting up in the bed. "Does she know the name we chose?"

Anakin shook his head. "No, I thought you'd like to tell her," he said.

Padmé smiled. "Yes, I would. I think she'll be happy."

"I'm sure she will," Anakin replied. He turned and looked at the door. 'Where are those kids?' he muttered. "I just have visions of Solo passing the baby around like he was a Corellian football."

Padmé laughed. "Now now," she said. "Han is going to be our son in law, remember?"

"How could I forget?" Anakin remarked.

"You like him, admit it," she said.

Anakin smiled. "Well, a little I suppose," he said. "I just wish he was a little more....respectful. Like Ylla."

"Ylla is a rare gem," Padmé said. "She will be the perfect wife for Luke."

"She will," Anakin agreed. He smiled. "Imagine — little Ruwee will probably be an uncle when he's less than five years old."

Padmé nodded. "Very possibly, yes."

The door opened and both Anakin and Padmé looked over to see their children walk into the room.

“Hi Mom,” Luke said, coming over to the bed. Leia joined him and they both kissed her.

“Where are Han and Ylla?” Padmé asked.

“We weren’t sure if you were awake,” Leia explained. “Is it okay if they come in?”

“Of course,” Padmé replied. “They’re practically family,” she added with a smile.

Leia nodded, and then handed her baby brother to her mother. Ruwee was awake now and looked up at his mother’s face. Padmé kissed his tiny nose, marveling in the perfection of his miniature features. She looked up as the door opened and saw Han and Ylla enter the room.

“Congratulations!” Ylla said as she came over to kiss Padmé. She looked down at the baby in her arms. “He is just beautiful,” she crooned.

“Thank you,” Padmé said, looking down at her new son with adoration.

“Hey, he looks like a miniature Luke,” Han commented with a smile.

“Does he?” Ylla said. She looked up at Padmé. “Did Luke look like this when he was a baby?”

Padmé looked up at Ylla, and then at Anakin. She could see that Anakin too had been thinking about the birth of their twins. It was difficult for her to remember that day without thinking of Mustafar, without thinking of what happened after they were born.

“There is a family resemblance, no doubt,” Padmé said at last.

Luke and Leia could see that this was a difficult topic for their parents, and they knew the reason why. Their birth had marked the end of their life together, and the beginning of the Darkness that had claimed the life of their father for two decades.

But the birth of young Ruwee marked a new beginning for the Skywalker family. It represented a second chance, one that Anakin had never believed he would be given. Not only that, it heralded the beginning of a New Republic.

Little by little the Imperial forces had seen the futility of fighting against the changes that Anakin had set into motion. Within two years of the death of Palpatine, every remaining vestige of the once mighty Empire had been eradicated, and the control of the galaxy had been returned to the local systems. The Senate had once again been established, with Mon Mothma as its leader, the Supreme Chancellor. The enormous Imperial army and navy were now the Republican Army and Navy, the clone army having been given new directives. It was an exciting time, a time of great change and even greater challenge. And yet, the promise of the future was great. The Sith had been destroyed, the Jedi Order reestablished. The galaxy had been reborn; and while no one would ever forget the errors of the past, all had been able to learn from them and never allow them to happen again.

Chapter 90

Author's Note

Well dear readers this is the end. It's been a long ride, the longest one yet. I am grateful for the support I've had for this story, which, as some of you may recall, I hesitated about writing. I'm glad I did it now. :)

About the EU elements I've put in this chapter— I do not read EU nor do I subscribe to any of it. Sorry, I'm a purist. So if some of the 'facts' don't jive with what is in those novels, sorry. Mara Jade doesn't exist in my Star Wars universe. :)

May the Force be with you, and thanks for reading.

TRT

EPILOGUE

Peace: a state of tranquility or quiet; freedom from civil disturbance; a state of security or order within a community provided for by law; freedom from disquieting or oppressive thoughts or emotions; harmony in personal relations; a state or period of mutual concord between governments; a pact or agreement to end hostilities between those who have been at war or in a state of enmity.

Peace: a word which many like to bandy about, but one that few actually truly understand. An entire generation in fact, knew nothing of this seemingly unattainable concept. Those born at the dawn of the Empire, those who had dedicated their lives to fighting said Empire, for them, the pursuit of peace had become their *raison d'être*. Many had died for the Cause, many had killed for it. And yet peace remained an unattainable goal. Until the redemption of the Chosen One.

Anakin Skywalker, conceived in the mysterious, awesome power of the Force, born amid poverty and depravation, destined for greatness. Yet that greatness was not without its price. His descent into Darkness, the agonizing loss of his mother, his wife and unborn child, his own dehumanization amid the fires of Mustafar, caused many, even he himself to wonder if there was any truth to the prophesy of the Chosen One. For two decades Skywalker lived in darkness, in the Hell that his master created for him. Ruthless, sadistic, delighting in nothing but power and cruelty, Skywalker seemed beyond redemption. Until his child found him.

Raised to be a princess, born to be a leader, Leia Organa had been raised to despise Darth Vader, her biological father. Bail and Breha Organa had done their best to shelter her from the truth of her paternity and raised her in a vacuity of information about her real parents. They had loved her as though they were her real parents. Leia's sense of justice had led her to become heavily involved in the Rebel Alliance, a cause she threw herself into whole heartedly. As Destiny often does, it changed Leia's life forever one day when she met her real father, the man she had been raised to hate. She was able to see beyond the darkness to the man he had once been, the man he was destined to be again. Her love and belief in him was

what brought him back, never to succumb again to the terrible Darkness that had defined his life for twenty years.

And so the Prophecy is fulfilled at last. The Chosen One had destroyed the Sith, and now, with the help of his children and grandchildren, has reestablished the Jedi Order. He knows that he can never atone completely for what the Darkness lead him to do; but he has devoted the remainder of his life to doing all that he can to try.

Anakin walked through the corridors of the hospital, a bouquet of flowers in his hand. *I'm a grandfather again*, he thought with a smile. *For the fifth time now.*

His first two grandchildren, Jacen and Jaina, the twins of Han and Leia, were already Padawans. Luke's two children, Ben and Adaira, were as well. The third Solo child had been born two days earlier, and Anakin had only now had the chance to come and see his newest grandson for himself.

Anakin stood outside the doorway, unsure if he ought to enter. There were always so many visitors in Leia's room, it was difficult to find a time when he could just have her all to himself. He was rarely afforded this privilege; as a mother, a Senator and a Jedi Master, Leia Skywalker Solo's life was a busy one. Anakin missed the days when the two of them could just spend time together alone, talking or simply being with one another.

He opened the door tentatively, expecting to be greeted by one or both of the twins, only to find the room unusually quiet. He looked over to the bed to see his daughter looking up at him with a smile on her face, her newborn son in her arms.

"Hi Daddy," she said. "I'm so happy you came."

Anakin returned her smile and walked over to the bed. "More flowers," he said, noticing that the room was fairly bursting with them. "Just what you need," he added wryly.

Leia laughed. "They're beautiful, thanks," she said as he bent to kiss her cheek. "Where's Mom?"

"Home," Anakin said, looking at his new grandson. "Ruwee has a pile of homework. I delegated."

Leia laughed again. "I'm glad you're here alone, actually," she said, looking down at her baby. "Everyone has been bugging me about what his name is. I wanted you to be the first to know."

"Oh?" Anakin said, setting the vase of flowers on the few small space left on the table beside her bed. "Why is that?"

"Because I named him after you, Dad," she said with a smile. "Meet Anakin Solo, Dad. Your namesake." She held the baby up to him.

Anakin was speechless as he took the small boy into his arms. "You named him after me?" he asked in amazement. "Han didn't object?" he added with a smile.

Leia laughed. "You know he thinks so much of you, Daddy," she replied. "Even if he doesn't always show it."

Anakin smiled. "Well, I'm not sure about that," he said, sitting down with the baby. 'He's beautiful,' he told Leia, and then kissed the boy's brow. He examined him for a moment, feeling a strong connection to the boy. He felt something else too. "Have you had his levels tested?"

Leia nodded. "He's higher than both the twins," she told him. "Even higher than me."

Anakin nodded. "I'm not surprised," he said. "I can feel it within him already. He'll be a great Jedi one day."

Leia smiled. "Like his grandfather," she said.

Anakin was pensive for a moment. "Like his mother," he added, looking up at her.

Leia reached a hand out to him, moved by his praise. "Thanks Daddy," she said, tearing up. "That means a lot coming from you."

The door opened just then and Padmé and Ruwee walked in, followed shortly thereafter by Luke and his family, as well as Han and the twins. Soon the room was boisterous again, with the entire family together in the small room.

"So? Did you tell him?" Han asked his wife, looking up at Anakin.

Leia nodded. "Yes, I did."

"Does that mean we can finally know this little guy's name?" Luke asked.

Leia nodded. "Yes," she replied. "His name is Anakin," she said, looking at her father with a smile.

Everyone highly approved of the choice, and congratulated Anakin Senior.

"You knew, didn't you?" Anakin asked his wife as she came to stand beside him to admire their newest grandson.

Padmé smiled. "Maybe," she said. "In any case, I highly approve."

"You know, kid, you were supposed to be named Anakin," Luke told his little brother.

Ruwee was surprised. "Was I?" he asked. He looked up at his father. "How come I'm not?"

"I wanted your mother to name you after her father," Anakin explained. "Your only grandfather."

"Grandma Jobal's husband?" Ruwee asked.

"That's right," Anakin replied. 'But I have to admit that it's nice to have someone named after me,' he added, looking back down at the baby in his arms. He walked away from the rest of the family and sat down, absorbed by the face of his namesake. "Some day I'll have lots of stories to tell you, young Anakin," he said. "Stories about your family, about your heritage, about your mother. She is a great woman, you know. Don't ever forget that. Just like her mother." He looked up at his family as they laughed and joked with one another, the four elder grandchildren playing games that only they understood. He had never dreamed that his

life could be so good, never imagined he could be so blessed. *I owe it all to you, my daughter*, he thought, looking at Leia with pride. *My precious daughter*.

Leia looked up at him, sensing his thoughts. She smiled at him. *Come back here with that baby*, she told him with a grin.

Anakin laughed and stood up and returned to his family, warmed by the love of them all.

THE END